

Chapter 1: The First Problem

“Morning, mum,” a familiar voice whispered giddily in Bella’s ear. Hoisting a tired smile onto her face, Bella blindly reached out for her son to tickle him as she’d been doing for the last three weeks of the summer holiday – an old routine she’d found herself unable to let go of once she began to regularly share a bed with Antares again. Antares didn’t fight back this time, more interested in wriggling out of her arms and rolling off the bed with a thump. “You don’t work today anymore, do you?”

Bella stifled a sigh, shaking her head as she did so. The summer balls had just gone by, and Madame Malkin had consequently announced that none of them needed to come in to the shop on Sundays or Mondays. It obviously made for an extremely pleasant weekend, even if she couldn’t spend all of her free time exactly as she liked.

“I think I’ll just sleep in a little,” Bella said, yawning slightly between each word. Antares rolled his eyes at that, but let her alone, and it wasn’t long after the sound of him thumping down the stairs before the door to his room opened again to reveal a furtive, slightly sleepy-looking Severus.

“About time you woke up,” he said quietly. “Any chance that –”

“No, Severus,” Bella said immediately, a rueful smile accompanying her near-silent words. “You know how he runs around in the morning. And you do remember our lessons together, don’t you? Because –”

But Severus was already sighing and beating a quick retreat. “You can’t blame a man for asking,” she heard him mutter as he closed the door, and it made her sigh. She truly couldn’t blame him – it was almost a week since the last time they’d been intimate, and she didn’t think she herself could go on much longer like that. Oh, it was lovely to have Antares close by, and to be able to talk to him and teach him, but Bella also wanted Severus’ warm arms and Severus’ even warmer hands on her at night, and she was starting to dream of the one lucky chance they’d had to be together in his bed so far.

Bella sighed, turning over in her own empty, unsatisfying bed. Of course, that encounter, though exciting, hadn't been nearly enough – she was starting to think she'd go mad always having him so close by and being unable to drag him into bed when she felt like it. The news about Quirrell's strange death and the Dark Lord's reappearance made it even worse, really – the hours and hours of frantic conversation over it should really have been balanced by equally frantic lovemaking, and had not.

Now, Bella knew just about everything there was that she could know about what had happened at Hogwarts almost a month ago. She still worried about finding some hidden effect that the Dark Lord's presence had had on Antares, and, more so, on Severus, and knew what she wanted – no, what she needed to do was spend a day or two just touching him and feeling him. If she could only find time to do that – but really, it was impossible! Antares seemed to be everywhere nowadays, waiting impatiently in the parlour so they could go out into the tiny, frighteningly overgrown garden or up into the boxy little attic and practice spells, or bustling about the kitchen burning bacon, or curled up on the living room sofa writing letters or reading one of the books he technically wasn't allowed to read. Sometimes –

Right, enough of that, Bella told herself firmly. *Out of bed with you – brooding isn't going to solve anything, so just have breakfast and do the best you can. Something'll turn up...* Unfortunately, that barely even dimmed her longing for a man's body in her bed. It was very well saying that something would turn up. Bella knew very well that it, that is, a solid hour to pin Severus to the wall with, hadn't come up in a week, and by the way Severus' study downstairs was starting to smell, he was unable to keep himself from starting to brew basic sleeping potions. Bella rolled her eyes and began to crawl out of bed – it was hard enough not just *Stupefying* Antares sometimes, when he was prancing about because of something or when his spells were all over the place. Thankfully, Severus didn't seem to have finished any of the batches he'd started, unless Bella would eventually make some excuse to go into his room and poach some, and maybe –

She closed her eyes, and yet her mind continued to mercilessly betray her, supplying her with unhelpful thoughts about how eager

Severus would be to please, and how long he'd probably last in his state, and how his mouth would taste –

Bella sighed. It was useless – there *had* to be some way they could be alone, if just for half an hour. If there was not, she would either go mad or grab hold of Severus and shag him on the kitchen table, and then there would be hell to pay. Sighing again at herself, Bella began to undress, doing so as quickly as possible so that she wouldn't need to think about how taut her nipples were in the cool air of the room. The shower was lukewarm but really approaching cold – something she needed, so she wouldn't distract herself and make Antares worry – and Bella was finished in minutes, and blindly raking through her hair with a comb and a hasty drying spell just so she could look presentable.

Although she did think Severus was past caring about how her hair felt; if they had a spare moment, they spent it kissing or touching each other. If they had more than that –

Get. Downstairs. Now. Bella obeyed her self-command reluctantly, muttering under her breath.

Antares was in fine form, tossing hash browns in the skillet and already clumsily levitating bacon onto what looked like Bella's plate. "Toast or hash browns?" he asked companionably, and a now-familiar guilt pierced Bella even as she smiled and pointed to the loaf of bread that was lying idle on the counter. A knife hopped over to it and began to slice, and though Bella still felt distracted by the thought of time with Severus, she managed to turn her attention to helping her son finish off breakfast and keeping up a steady conversation about why he was so bad at keeping up a steady stream of spells when it was needed.

"I'm starting to think I should show you what a barrage looks like," Bella said decisively, rising and stretching slowly, having finished the food on her plate. "You react much more than you act, that's the problem. How on earth did you get through fighting that troll?"

"Mum, I can't just fire off six spells without watching what the other person is doing," Antares replied impatiently. "The troll was easy

because it was slow – you’re really fast, and you never move where you look like you’re going –”

Bella rolled her eyes. “That’s the point, Antares – a barrage tips things slightly in your favour, because the person dodging can’t dodge forever, and they’ll be too busy avoiding your curses to let off more than one of their own – which *you* can dodge easily – which is when you take them down.” She barely registered how the plates and breakfast things were floating into the sink of their own accord, so determined was she that her son took this in properly. “Come on into the garden, I’ll show you.”

“Don’t set fire to the fence,” Severus said dryly from behind them. Bella stifled the urge to jump and stifled the other, stronger urge to press a kiss to his cheek as she herded Antares out of the kitchen, through the dirty back door and into the tiny garden. After a quick wave of her wand, the sky shimmered above them, and the air seemed to become thicker – splendid. Now, no one would see them, even if they looked right over the fence.

“Now, what’s going to happen is this,” Bella said determinedly, her lips twitching with approval when she saw that Antares was drawing his wand from his sleeve – she did love how he carried it with him all the time. “*I’ll* curse you, and you’ll dodge. Try to disarm me, will you? *Mordeo*.” Antares dodged that easily, but almost didn’t dodge the next stinging hex, and the next and the next after that. Bella was gratified to see a streak of light come back at her at least twice, but it was soon clear that Antares was tiring, as she hit him three times in a row. He grimaced on the third strike, tripping over a rather aggressive begonia and stumbling to the ground. Bella allowed him a moment to catch his breath, but no more.

“*Mordeo! Mordeo – mordeo – mordeo –*”

“*Adimo!*” The cry faltered – Bella knew her stinging hexes were never easy to bear – but it did deflect the last one right back at her, so she had to dodge. And then an unusually bright streak of a stinging hex had hit her, and *hurt* –

A minute later, her wand slipped out of her hand, and Antares was half on his feet, wand pointed resolutely in her direction. *Her* wand.

“*Accio*,” Bella said coolly, but she knew her eyes were shining as Antares let go of her shaking wand, letting it fly into her hand. “You didn’t verbalise, Antares. You know that’s a dangerous habit to develop now –”

“I did, Mum, you just didn’t hear me,” Antares said diffidently, getting to his feet with a smug look on his face. “I think I understand now, about barras.”

“Barrages,” Bella said, smiling. “That’s enough about them, for now – how are your locking spells? We didn’t do them yesterday.”

Antares fidgeted, coming closer with a nervous look on his face. “I know just the one,” he said, sounding a little too offhand. “It’s not very –”

Bella waved the back door closed behind them. “Show me anyway.” The moment Antares flicked his wand, pausing before enunciating, she knew who had taught him that spell.

Quirrell.

“*Offirmo*,” Antares said firmly, and the door seemed to expand a little in its frame as the lock clicked. “D’you want to try the door, to see if I did it all right? Sometimes, when we – when I did it, it’d just expand a bit, but not actually lock –”

“Quirrell taught you that spell,” Bella said, her grip tightening on her wand, “didn’t he?”

Antares was still for too long, and didn’t quite look her in the eye as he replied. “Mum – no.”

“Do you know why the door expands when you lock it?” Bella demanded, memories starting to rise to the front of her mind, so fast that she could not turn all of them away. “It’s because it seals the room – completely. Nothing can get out, or in – even air.”

Antares went white as he realised the meaning of that, but still spoke. “Mum, I don’t think he meant –”

“And I don’t think you realise just how much Quirrell was tainted,” Bella said angrily. “It would have been a great joke to him, teaching a child that sort of spell and encouraging them to use it to lock their door if they needed privacy – Antares, Quirrell held *the Dark Lord* in his head. Don’t you see what that means?”

“Mum –”

“Everything he said,” Bella continued, ignoring Antares’ weak protests, “everything he did, everything he did for you – *everything* was tainted, Antares.” Further ignoring, Antares’ visible discomfort. “Don’t use that spell again.”

“Mum, it’s the only locking spell I *know*,” Antares complained angrily. “How was I supposed to know it could –”

“Is it the only locking spell on the planet? I’ll teach you another one,” Bella snapped. “Just don’t use it, you hear me? And all those other spells he taught you – I’ll need to see them and hear them one by one. There’s no telling what he could’ve taught you; Merlin, but I should have known to check.”

But somehow Antares was still arguing, still stubborn. “Mum, almost all the spells he taught me were standard! I looked them all up, after – after – I swear I did, Mum, and *Offirmo* was the only one I couldn’t find...” Horror began to show on his face, a horror that Bella did not know the roots of. It was terrifying to see. “I checked, Mum, I swear –”

“What did he teach you?” Bella demanded, watching his eyes as he turned slightly away, fidgeting agitatedly with his wand. “Antares –”

“The stinging hex,” he said quickly. “The – disarming charm. Um – also the *Impedimenta*, and the Jelly-legs jinx, the *Locomotor* and *Locomotor mortis* – I can’t remember all of them, but –”

“Did you ever write them down?” Bella asked, not too distracted by the thought of Quirrell teaching the Dark Arts to her son to notice the way he blanched at that. “Or did he?”

“He did,” Antares said haltingly. “I – I still have –”

“You’ll show me, then,” Bella said, trying not to squeeze her wand any harder. That that – that *filth* had actually – “And Antares? If you remember anything extra, anything at all that he did not write down, you *must* tell me, understood?”

“Yes, mum,” Antares mumbled, eyes downcast, his posture the very picture of unwillingness. Bella nodded, pointing the way to the door, hoping that perhaps, Quirrell wouldn’t have – “*Aperio*.” – taught him the counterspell. “Um – shall I –”

“Yes,” Bella managed to say, unable to see more than a dark little room and a pregnant muggle woman, and what had been done to her. “Yes, please.”

Unsurprisingly, the rest of the lesson did not go well. Antares was nervous now, and hesitated to put his all into every spell Bella made him perform from the grubby list he’d fetched, even the ones that she had quickly designated as suitable for him to continue using. What was worse was how unhappy he looked whenever she crossed another spell resolutely off – Bella did not like to think it, but she couldn’t help drawing certain conclusions about her son when he almost protested at not being able to use several rather nasty jinxes.

“You don’t need them, Antares,” Bella said over and over again, but the only thing she could see on her son’s face in response to that was stubborn mutiny. It hurt – she hadn’t set out to raise him like this, like herself – “Antares, using *any* jinxes in Hogwarts is close to breaking school laws; using these against the wrong person could get you on probation, for goodness’ sake!”

Somehow, that was the worst thing to say. “You don’t trust my judgment anymore, do you Mum?” Antares accused, anger colouring his cheeks. “It’s not *fair*! It’s not like I go round hexing cousins of the Minister or anything –”

“But you do go around behind my back,” Bella said, through gritted teeth, “associating with people I *expressly* told you to keep away from –”

“*How was I supposed to know –*”

“How weren’t you?” Bella demanded, trying and failing to prevent herself from raising her voice. “I told you; *Severus* told you, and yet *Severus* told me it took Quirrell trying to harvest your blood for you to see that anything about him was out of the ordinary!” Antares fell silent at that, but Bella could tell it was a stubborn silence, and it infuriated her – “How am I supposed to ‘*trust your judgment*’ if you won’t bother listening to simple advice?”

Antares drew in a sharp breath. “Mum, you never even saw Quirrell – it just – he just seemed –”

“Seems, he says,” Bella hissed angrily. “Oh, Quirrell must have *seemed* good – he had to! How many times must I tell you that things aren’t always what they seem? Did I raise you to think like a fool, Antares?” Her son stayed angrily silent, biting his lip. “*Did I?*”

Someone cleared their throat behind her uncomfortably. Bella looked backward to see *Severus*’ whole delicious frame emerging from within the house, the expression on his face one of exaggerated neutrality.

“So sorry – just wanted to inform you that I’ll be going to Hogsmeade instead of Diagon Alley,” he said lowly, ignoring the way Antares glared at him. “Don’t delay lunch or even tea for me, as I may be back only just before dinner.” With that, he withdrew back into the house and shut the door, firmly, as if that would keep him from hearing any more. It made Bella’s cheeks burn with embarrassment – how loud had she been, just now, that he could have heard –

Bella’s train of thought was cut off, then, by the startling exit of Antares, who made for the back door with the sort of single-minded intensity that made Bella think twice of stopping his progress. Seconds later, she was following him into the house and placing a stout Silencing Charm on the back door after closing it – it would be embarrassing if someone could eavesdrop on conversations in the garden so easily again.

After she and Antares re-entered the house, they both proceeded to the kitchen as if on some sort of mutual agreement, and there Bella continued her instruction of her son.

More like my shouting at his stupid head, Bella thought to herself, glaring at him as he went about the task of making lunch, which he was somehow managing to do while throwing every argument back into her face as if she was the one that needed instruction. It had been fifteen minutes now of them almost shouting back and forth, and Bella was beginning to fear how frighteningly stubborn Antares was being about the whole thing. He still refused to say that his choice to stick with Quirrell even after being warned against him had been more than a little misguided, despite everything Bella tried to say.

“You don’t understand, Mum! He was the last person you’d think of, for having...something like that, hanging around him,” Antares was earnestly repeating for what seemed like the fourth time. “If he hadn’t taught me anything, I wouldn’t have survived the troll – you keep forgetting that –”

Bella huffed indignantly – no matter how many times she said and said this, he still didn’t seem to understand! “Antares, anyone else could have taught you the same thing –”

“Who, then?” Antares said, maddeningly. But it was his next statement that would really bother her: “No one cared enough to bother, then – and you said I couldn’t practice with you at home until you got some permit –”

“– so we wouldn’t be breaking the law, for fuck’s sake!” Bella stared at her son’s back, willing him to turn around, willing him to understand – she’d known she’d done the right thing in terms of the permit. She still knew that – why couldn’t he understand that she only wanted the best for him, that she wasn’t just restricting him out of irritation, or –

“Well fine, so you *couldn’t* teach me – so he did, so what?”

“Everything he ever did for you was based on a selfish reason, Antares,” Bella said, trying hard to keep her voice level and hoping that she was succeeding. “You don’t know how those men think, you don’t know how the Dark Lord thinks, and when I try to tell you –”

But instead of letting her finish, Antares slammed down the pan he was currently meddling with, his limbs agitated with an amount

irritation that surprised her. “All you ever say is that I don’t know this and I don’t know that, Mum! You’ve never come out and said –”

“I should have thought that was obvious, for goodness’ sake!” Bella snapped, though her eyes watched and marvelled at how Antares slowed and quieted his movements as he checked carefully on the greens that were cooking in another pan. “When people act selfishly in everything, they don’t *care* about anyone else unless it affects them! You should be able to understand how that would –”

Antares, who had turned around to face her by this point, rolled his eyes. “Then *why did he bother teaching me?*”

“Obviously, he thought it would benefit him!”

“*How?*” Antares practically shouted. “Everything he wanted was *obvious*, Mum – I knew where I stood, that’s why I got out when I did –”

It was at that statement that Bella lost her temper. “*And what about next time? What about when you can’t get out? It’s never going to be the same way, you don’t understand, I thought this way, I lived this way, AND LOOK WHERE IT GOT ME!*”

Antares stayed stock still after that, his frame turned firmly away from her, his hand gripping the handle of a pan as if it were a lifeline. Bella couldn’t stand to be in the kitchen anymore, not with her son working so hard not to look at her or listen to her. Not with her son edging down the same path as she had, the same path that had led her through hell and fire and self-loathing and despair –

Bella stood up, shakily, and left. It was the smartest thing to do, at that point – her magic felt like a noose tightening around her own neck, and her eyes brimmed with angry, despairing tears. She rubbed angrily at them, hating the feeling of helplessness that was starting to settle into her gut.

Behind her, through the kitchen door, she could hear pots and pans starting to be moved around again, and somehow it hurt more to know that Antares would still finish making and serving lunch while she was clearly unprepared to do anything but scream at him than

anything else. It made her decision easier, because to retreat from this was to protect herself from the twisting pain in her heart –

“Antares?” Bella called out, trying to steady her voice. Failing. “Don’t bother with lunch, not for me.” Even as she hurried up the stairs, she heard Antares calling after her.

She did not let herself answer.

It seemed a long time before Antares thought to look for her in Severus’ room, but at least it left Bella time to cry herself out properly. It left her time to burrow deep between these familiar sheets. It was good.

Antares sounded unhappy, but still stubborn. “Mum...?”

“Please don’t,” Bella found herself saying. “Don’t lie that you’ve listened, please – I know you haven’t –”

Antares’ footsteps came closer. “Won’t you even let me say anything?”

“There is no point,” Bella insisted. “Anyway, it’s your choice to make. I can’t – can’t tell you what to believe, can I?”

Antares seemed unsure of how to answer that. “Mum –”

“Just come here,” Bella said, sitting up slowly. It hurt to see how reluctantly he came over to her side of the bed, but Bella ignored it, seizing him in what was probably a painful hug. It felt horribly good to not hear Antares complain about it, enough to make her want to cry again –

“Mum,” Antares said, sounding a little strangled, “why did you come here?” *Instead of my room*, Bella could clearly hear. *Instead of our room* –

“No reason,” she said, and hoped he would believe it. It seemed like he did, because he shut his eyes and hugged her harder, and that was the end of the argument.

Of course, being reconciled to Antares after their horrid argument didn't help make the day any less boring. Bella, after having allowed Antares to coax her into eating lunch and into practicing a few more spells with him, was soon left to her own devices, which, sadly enough, comprised adjustments to more dresses from the shop. It didn't help that Severus was gone – though he'd have distracted her greatly, it would have served to cheer her a bit, what with the dreariness of her current task.

Said task included responding occasionally to Antares' demanding questions about a book on Charms that he'd probably lifted from one of Severus' shelves without permission (Severus tended to be rather forbidding about lending Antares anything), and amending a rather boring set of blue robes that was due to be handed back to Madame Malkin tomorrow morning. Bella did hate doing these – there was never anything challenging about resizing garments or mending rips that the stupidest house elf could fix with little difficulty – but knew very well that it was part of the warranty offered with many of Malkin's more expensive robes, and therefore a fairly important, if also fairly dull task.

Bella had just finished re-checking the stupid thing for anything needing mending that she or the owner might have missed when the fire in the hearth flared green. Bella tried to temper her excitement at seeing Severus step back into their living room, but she couldn't help giving him a welcoming smile anyway – he looked like he needed it, really, and she didn't think Antares would notice.

"Please tell me there's still Firewhiskey in the pantry," was the first thing he said. Antares snorted at that, but was ignored when Bella nodded reassuringly in Severus' direction. He wasted no time in setting off for the kitchen, sloughing off his hat on the way and running impatient fingers through his – Bella's heart skipped a beat – fairly clean hair.

It was somehow inevitable that Antares should choose that moment to make a snide comment. "Please don't overdo it, Professor! That stuff's not good for anyone's health –"

“Antares, *please*,” Bella said immediately, but she couldn’t prevent Severus from shooting a poisonous glare over his shoulder in Antares’ direction, and she certainly couldn’t prevent herself from watching him all the way into the kitchen and hoping hard that Antares would go to bed early without coaxing just this once –

“Mum! Are you listening?”

“Of course, dear,” Bella said automatically, stifling a sigh. It was really best not to hope.

Perhaps it was that attitude that caused it, perhaps not. All Bella knew to do was to stop the surprise and delight from showing on her face as Antares soon announced tiredly that he was going to bed.

Of course, she could not resist asking why. “So early? What –”

“Didn’t sleep too well last night,” Antares said, yawning as he stood, the Charms book dangling precariously in his loose grip. “There was this dream that...never mind.”

“What? What dream?” Bella asked, partly against her will. She did want to know, but that would entail him staying and telling her, and that would delay being able to *do* something about the freedom she would certainly have tonight.

“Nah, it’s nothing,” Antares said, still sounding legitimately tired. It was the way he avoided her eye – almost effortlessly enough that she didn’t notice – that signalled that he was lying. “Night, Mum.”

“Night, Antares,” Bella said, using the ‘Don’t think I’ll forget this’ tone to placate her scolding conscience. “Close the door after you, will you? And check the back door – I think it’s letting in a draft.” Antares nodded sleepily and did as he was told, and in what seemed like seconds Severus was sliding into the room, his face relaxed enough for her to tell he’d been drinking, yet still alert enough that Bella could tell he’d probably eavesdropped on the whole exchange.

“Wait,” she said quickly, as sternly as she could. Severus continued to advance, but made no attempt to embrace her even once he was close enough. “I didn’t know you washed your hair this morning –”

That seemed to encourage him, for his arms were around her in an instant. “There are many places I washed this morning – care to explore?”

“Morgana, Severus, set up some wards first,” Bella whispered heatedly, gulping as his arms tightened around her. He was so close that she could feel –

“*Silencio...Praedicere.*” Bella’s only warning, then, was the sound of Severus’ wand clattering onto the centre table, and then he was kissing her, and she actually could not think –

“...join me on the couch,” Severus was whispering, his breath hot against her neck and ear. “Come on –”

After that, it was a veritable whirlwind of kisses and moans. It was only gradually that Bella became aware of the hard-edged lump of her sewing-case that was sticking into her back, and even after digging that out, she only paused to help Severus’ shaking fingers unbutton her robes and help him start struggle out of his own, which were getting in the way –

“Oh, for – *Scindo!*” The stupid row of buttons that had been tormenting her slit open with nearly no sound, and the only thing Bella could hear for a while was Severus chuckling in her ear about how much she wanted him. That was, until she’d peeled the irritating garment off him and flung it as far away as she could –

Something squealed, and they froze. Severus sighed, obviously unwilling to check. “I don’t think that was –”

The thing squealed again, and the rustling of fabric could be heard. Despite Severus’ grumbling, Bella struggled out from under him, only to see the stupid mannequin in the corner, fighting to get Severus’ robe off itself. Bella swore at the mannequin, at its makers, at its distributors and at Severus’ robe as she tried to strip it of both Severus’ robe and the one she’d been working on earlier. The silly thing seemed to quiet after that, and Bella soon found herself returning to Severus’ side.

“Sorry,” she said, starting to peel off her own robes, trying not to be distracted by the mannequin again, whom she could see beginning to preen out of the corner of her eye. “I thought –”

“I don’t mind,” Severus said, drawing her down to him, and they were soon kissing again, drinking greedily of one another because it had been very long since they’d had this, had this time –

Something moved, and Bella stilled confusedly, trying to see what it was. It was only the mannequin again, bending over something, only it had looked like it was – but she was being silly, and wasting time. She tried hard to suppress her instinctive response, which was to reach for her wand, which was too far away for her to simply call it into her hand if she wanted to –

“Bella?” Severus whispered, stilling against her. “Look, if you’re so distracted –”

Bella sighed. “It’s that bloody mannequin,” she muttered, going limp in his arms in partial defeat. “I just – it just feels like someone’s –”

“It’s an inanimate object,” Severus said, closing his eyes momentarily. “There is no one here – I set a ward, I would know.” Despite the knowledge that he *had* set one on the doors leading into the room (and at her request, no less) it was hard for Bella to spot the movements of the mannequin out of the corner of her eye and not feel as if it was someone spying on them.

“They can almost speak, Severus, I’d rather not –”

Severus sighed, his hands finally ceasing to caress her. “Bella, what are they charmed to do?”

Bella rolled her eyes, feeling a little irritated that he’d ask such a question. “Severus, I’m just not comfortable doing this while one of them’s in here –”

Severus snorted. “*One of them*, as if it’s really alive –”

“– and I would appreciate it,” Bella continued, giving him a sharp look, “if you’d respect that.” Severus shifted on top of her impatiently, and

she was rather firmly reminded of why she'd called this impromptu session at all. They had hardly had a chance to do this all week, and this was a golden opportunity to thoroughly enjoy themselves together without interruption. Now, if Severus would just be sensible and agree to move so she could put the damned mannequin elsewhere like she should have in the first place –

"I just don't see why you're so bloody conscious of it," he muttered. "It's not like it's alive –"

"Well, Severus, when I see something moving out of the corner of my eye, I usually assume it's alive!" Bella snapped. "It's stood me in good stead for ten years, that habit, and it's not one I can just put away at the drop of a hat –"

"So," Severus interrupted, his expression darkening, "you're saying you feel nervous in my house?"

Oh dear – oh please let this not turn into that, Bella prayed, her thoughts racing as she replied, her tone purposely light and exasperated. "Oh, for – you feel nervous in your own bloody kitchen, and you take issue with *me* feeling –"

"Of course I bloody well take issue, when you'd assured me that you felt safe here," Severus said indignantly, making Bella's face fall. He was so sensitive about this that it was annoying – "The Dark Lord –"

That did it. That *really* did it. "Why must you always assume –"

"– because it's all you've talked about for the past few weeks!" Severus said, through gritted teeth. "Bella, if he returns to the British Isles, *I'll be able to tell you* –"

"I didn't say anything about him coming back!" Bella argued hotly, but her irritatingly traitorous brain was readily supplying her with how fervently she'd shouted at Antares, and what exactly had driven her to do that and to train him. Severus was right, and it just made her more defensive than anything. "I don't know why you persist on saying that I –"

“Fine,” Severus said, in that half-angry, half-mollifying tone of voice she soon understood as the one he adopted when he didn’t want to displease her. “Fine, I accept that you didn’t.” Bella sighed irritably, trying not to feel even more annoyed that he was trying to apologise for what they both knew was a fairly serious concern of his – “Please can we just enjoy this? It’s been days since we –”

She shut him up with a kiss, hoping it would melt the defensive irritation she could still feel in her calming body, in his slightly stiffened arms. For a while, it did, goading Severus’ hands into returning to their nefarious activities. One had just begun its usual journey up the inside of her thigh when the sound of something bumping loudly into something jolted Bella from her renewed haze of arousal.

Bella looked, and that was it. “Wait,” she mumbled, struggling out from under Severus’ pleasant weight. He groaned in reproach as she slid out from under him, but Bella was too determined to listen, immediately calling her wand to her. She had the bloody *right* to fuck without a bloody mannequin spying on her and making her nervous when she had no need to be –

“Bella, *please* –”

“*Wingardium Leviosa!*” Bella hissed, and soon the stupid mannequin was squealing as it was levitated past the sofa and through the kitchen door, where it squealed yet again as it bumped into something. Bella let the spell go then, immediately slamming the door after it so that the stupid thing wouldn’t hobble its stupid way back into the living room while they were finishing what they’d started. Or, from the look of Severus, who was dispiritedly sitting up from his prone position on the sofa, began afresh.

“Bella, for goodness’ sake –”

“I’m fine, Severus,” she said hastily, tossing her wand onto the centre table and making to sit down beside him. “We can do this now, that thing’s too stupid to do anything with the stove...”

But Severus seemed to have reached the final straw. “Look, either you take this seriously, or –”

"I *am* taking it seriously!"

"You were before," Severus allowed, his tone extremely grudging. "But now...this just isn't working."

Bella began to be alarmed – he didn't sound in the least bit conciliatory, which meant that this might be their first real argument. It was somehow frightening, and in that strained moment of silence that hung between them, Bella began to understand why Severus was so eager to please, sometimes. "Oh, Severus, it's just that –"

"You don't even trust me," he said then, so quietly that Bella stilled too.

"Severus, you know that's –"

"Be honest, for once," he demanded, turning to face her with an expression hurtful in its intensity. "No, really – what does it say about us that you don't even feel safe in my home, safe while we're –"

"It's a *habit*," Bella said fiercely, hoping her fervour would convince him. "It has nothing to do with trust –"

Severus' eyes hardened, enough that she suddenly felt nervous. "Then let me see –"

"No," she snapped, even before he could finish articulating his request. For a moment, she couldn't even look at him, until she realised that he might be talking about something other than peering into her mind. But when she looked back into his eyes, the intention was there, clear enough that she could see it. "No, Severus." She snatched her hands out of his encroaching grip, and tried to pretend they weren't shaking. He didn't understand how hard won this peace was, how much she'd striven to put every memory in its proper place, some out of sight, some not. And with his principles and his skills at Legilimency, he could just go blundering about and eradicate the mental order that kept her sane – it would be unthinkable to give him the chance –

“What do you fear so much?” Severus was whispering, now, his tone about as determined as it was possible for a whispered entreaty to be. “Why won’t you just let me look?”

“You’ll – you’ll ruin it,” was the only reason Bella seemed able to articulate. His hands caressed hers, and it felt good, but that would soon change if he – “Severus, don’t –”

“Relax,” he commanded, pulling her close to him, and somehow it was easier to breathe, then, with his voice so close to her ear, with his firm chest behind her as a warm anchor for her to discreetly cling to. “Please, Bella – I’ll only look. We don’t even have to speak about it again, if you –”

“Fine,” Bella said, wishing she didn’t sound so cross. But really, he’d be able to tell, wouldn’t he? From the way his hands were rubbing soothingly at her stomach and carefully stroking her hair, he already knew how tense she was. How unwilling. Still – “Just do it, for goodness’ sake.”

Severus made no reply, simply raising one hand and silently calling his wand into it. With some adjustment on his part, Bella found herself looking up into his worried eyes, and then – “*Legilimens...*”

She was out of practice – she knew that from the moment she felt Severus’ direct, impatient touch on what seemed like five threads of association at once – but she still managed to highlight what she thought he wanted to see, still managed to guide him away from the things she had no intention of him seeing. When Severus surged off the path she’d hastily planned out for him, Bella could almost feel the headache she was surely going to have after this get worse as she drove him back, as she refused to remember certain things in detail.

Eventually, Severus grudgingly let go of the associations that linked her memories of the year after she had been cast out by Rodolphus and the Dark Lord, and let himself be guided instead to the years after that – the long years of Bella constantly looking over her shoulder, constantly planning, constantly thinking of what she could do to make her and her son’s existence better. In the process of keeping Severus viewing those memories and old thoughts, Bella let

slip a few that she had wanted confined, but overall felt that she had done all she could.

It was an effort to speak, but she managed it. “Do you understand?” Her mouth felt dry, and her head was already pounding, but it felt important that he knew, that he didn’t feel she’d held back from him, that she’d put up some sort of smokescreen of an answer before him so he would leave her alone.

“I think so,” Severus muttered easily, easily enough that Bella wanted to roll her eyes and say something tart about his bloody over-proficiency at this art, but in the next moment she was too occupied in masking the memory of adopting Antares by blood to think of anything else. For a brief moment, that day shivered before her eyes, full of harsh sunlight and thirst and desperation, and in the next Bella had somehow shoved it deep down, and was yanking threads of association away from Severus’ grasping mind. A minute later she’d slapped him and broken eye contact, and was thinking very angrily about slapping him again when Severus blushed and began to retreat from her with an embarrassed look on his face.

“Bella –”

“If you try that again,” she began, the memory hitting her now. It made her eyes itch with tears, and made her want to thwack Severus over the head with her wand again and again. “Severus, I *told* you –”

“I’m sorry,” was all he said, his voice still with meaning. “I – I thought it might amuse you, or...”

“Idiot,” Bella spat, but she was already reaching for him again, feeling almost as if she could kiss the idiocy from him somehow. Despite her aching head, it felt intoxicating, kissing him now. She could still feel the way he had felt within her mind, could still feel the imprint the sharp edges of his consciousness had made in hers, and soon all she could think of was getting as close to him as she physically could.

It was only a matter of time before they had rolled accidentally off the sofa. Bella laughed as quietly as she could – which was to say, not very quietly at all, and Severus cursed colourfully at the couch and the floor and the centre table, on which he’d half fallen.

“This is useless,” he muttered, as they tried to get back on the couch and disrobe at the same time. “Antares – isn’t he asleep?”

“Why are you still talking?” Bella demanded hazily, tugging at his hand so it could get back to worming its way into her underthings.

But Severus didn’t let himself be budged – much. “We can do this in my room,” he suggested, his voice low and rough. “We can lock the door –”

“Suspicious,” was all Bella could think to say, but the lure of being able to thoroughly wear him out in the privacy of his bedroom was too much. “Oh, fine – no dawdling, understand?” A quick smile from Severus as he got shakily to his feet was the only indication of his intention before he was suddenly gathering her into his arms and staggering over to the door that led to the stairs with her. Bella tried to fight back a giggle and failed when a highly distracted Severus ended up lowering her to the bottom stair, being thoroughly out of breath. “Is that all?” she teased. “I’m not moving one step from here – I absolutely demand that you have your way with me in your bed, not on the stairs like some common hussy –”

“On the stairs, you say?” Severus whispered, kissing her with a mischievous glint in his eyes that only meant trouble. Hot, hard trouble – “Are you averse to against the wall?” He didn’t even wait for her answer, heaving her to her feet with an enthusiasm that was contagious and backing her against the nearest wall.

“Someone’s in a hurry,” was all she could think to whisper tauntingly in reply, and then he was kissing her so hard it hurt, and his hands and hips were too busy against hers for her to be coherent any longer. All Bella could do was feel, moaning unashamedly, hoping fuzzily that they wouldn’t be heard –

A clatter was all the indication they had, and Bella didn’t even pay attention to what it could mean until ropes were suddenly bristling around Severus, some blindly groping at her own hands, and she would have toppled over with him if she hadn’t thought to wrench her hands free of the tightening ropes at the last moment. Her mind was still overheated from arousal, so she almost did not understand what Antares was doing halfway down the stairs, looking as frightened as

she'd ever seen him, until he'd thrown her a wand – Severus' wand – and was yelling frantically at her to move.

Bella moved then, shock exploding in the pit of her stomach like an ugly cloud as she stepped over Severus' wriggling form. She hoped against hope that she wasn't completely indecent. She almost dropped Severus' wand at the earnest, angry look on Antares' face. She realised, with the immediacy and the panic fitting for the situation, that she and Severus had been found out.

His words began to penetrate her brain, just as suddenly as his ropes had appeared. “– it won't take me long to pack!” And then Antares was turning and bounding up the stairs, and Bella sprang into motion, dreading this. She caught him almost too easily, wand forgotten, and tried not to be too rough in prying his wand from his shaking hand.

“Antares –”

“No,” he moaned, the desperation of it tearing at her, “no, no, he can't have – I should've *known* –”

“Antares, calm down,” Bella insisted, trying to keep him in her arms without restricting him too much – he was so frightened, and of what, she couldn't – “Antares, be still, please –”

But he wasn't even listening. “He's got you under the *Imperius*, hasn't he?” Antares babbled, his struggles suddenly ceasing. “I knew it –”

“Bella –”

“Severus, I'll handle this,” Bella said quickly, guilt weighing heavily in her stomach as she watched Antares' eyes widen in fear and felt him stiffen as Severus, no longer constrained by those ropes, began to limp up towards them. “Go upstairs.”

“But wouldn't a calming potion –”

“*Upstairs*, Severus. Now.” Antares almost seemed to relax at that, at how commanding Bella's tone was just then, and it gave her hope. “I'm sorry you had to find out this way –”

“But Mum, he was –”

“I know,” Bella said, fighting a blush of shame. “I – I’ve been wanting to tell you. I knew it wouldn’t make you happy –”

“What if he’s making you say this?” Antares demanded. Bella’s heart sank – if there was ever a time when she was sorry to have made sure he knew what the Unforgivables were, it was now. “He could just be listening, and making you say –”

“*Imperturbatus*,” Bella said quickly, pointing up at the door at the top of the stairs. Antares watched it squelch itself shut with disbelief in his eyes, making her heart sink further – this was obviously going to be difficult. “You know he can’t hear us through that door now, don’t you?”

“He could have planned this,” Antares muttered. “Told you what to say –”

“Severus can be a paranoid fool, but he’s not that paranoid,” Bella snapped. “You’re making far too much of this, and all I’m trying to do –”

“Well if you weren’t under *Imperius*, why didn’t you tell me?” That stopped Bella short, as did the hurt look on her son’s face. “You would’ve told me, if you weren’t –”

“It’s not that simple –”

“Then *why*?” Antares half-shouted, struggling out of her arms. “You never want to tell me anything!”

“Antares, I didn’t want to upset you!”

“You’re lying!” Antares yelled, his voice cracking as he did so. “You don’t even care –”

Bella tried to reach out to him, but he slapped her hands away. “Leave me alone!” Antares ran up the stairs, then, banging into the shut door hard enough that it started Bella running up after him, unable to watch her son bang himself bloody against the...suddenly

open door. Antares bolted through it before Bella could reach him and was running into his room and slamming the door after him before she, breathing hard from confusion and guilt and bewilderment, could do anything else. A minute later, she saw the door expand to fit into its frame, closer than she'd seen downstairs, and that was all that was needed to send her crying again.

The next few minutes were a haze. Severus' door opened as she went past it, but Bella could bring herself to pay no more attention to it than she would to a house elf. She was far too focused on trying the door, trying to get in, trying to keep herself from begging or crying or –

"You're only encouraging him," Severus whispered into her ear, as his warm hands pried her away from the door. "Bella, please, calm down –"

"Did you hear him?" Bella demanded, instead. "He thinks you – he thinks I'm –"

"He's hysterical, Bella," Severus said firmly, drawing her into his room and forcing her to sit down on something soft. "And, sad to say, so are you. You need to calm down before you speak to him again."

"Not here –"

"Why not here?" Severus insisted, sitting close to her and squeezing her shoulder. "He already knows –"

"He doesn't understand –"

"You can make him do so later," Severus snapped. "Look, it was inevitable that he find out – you said so yourself. He'll adjust. *We'll* adjust. Stop worrying." His voice had lowered by now, becoming more soothing as both his hands set to kneading her shoulders. "Please, Bella."

Bella sniffed, and subsided, finally. It felt good to hear this from someone, good in a way that made her long to be close to Severus again though she knew it was unwise, and she knew she should be going after Antares again. But Severus was closer, nearer, and the

way his breathing hitched as she shifted nearer to his side made her feel as if this was the most important thing she could be doing right now. When she gave in and let herself kiss him, that feeling only increased, despite the screaming of her conscience, and by the time Severus asked haltingly about Antares, Bella found it easy to tell him that Antares could wait.

And wait he did. This time, there were no disturbances, no interruptions, and nothing to remind her that her son was still upset, still waiting, except for the hazy thought that she was drifting off to sleep in the wrong place, in the wrong bed, beside the wrong person. And that thought soon drifted away too, with all other thoughts, because Bella had fallen asleep.

Funnily enough, Bella didn't remember what had happened until while in the shower, rushing through her morning preparations so she could get to Diagon Alley well in time to browse at Quality Quidditch before going to work. Suddenly, she remembered why she needed to browse there at all, and was out of the shower and scrabbling for her wand in minutes.

"Bella?" That was Severus, and it made Bella want to slap herself. Instead she began to perform some very hasty drying spells, praying inwardly that everything – "Bella, are you...?"

"I have to go," Bella muttered, pushing past him to get back into his bedroom. The messy, debauched state of the sheets struck guilt into her like a knife – how could she have forgotten so –

"Bella, wait," Severus said hastily, sounding sleepy and alarmed in a way that made her want to slap herself again because she *wanted* to reassure him with a kiss, needed to turn round and let herself be caught hold of – "I should have woken you, I'm sorry, I fell aslee –"

"I'm going now," Bella said, quietly, but she knew she wasn't moving, and he wasn't moving. Perhaps it was because of the way the skin of his back felt under her fingers – warm, alive. Hers, somehow.

Morgana, but I'm stupid –

Severus blinked, then kissed her softly on the cheek, and somehow that made her feel even worse –

Then the door opened, and Bella knew the raw, massive panic of yesterday evening yet again. She tried to step away from Severus, to cover herself, to cover *him*, as if it could explain anything.

By the look on Antares' face, it did not. Bella hadn't even spoken a word before he left, not bothering to close the door. Severus sighed behind her, and tried to take hold of her, and despite her guilt, Bella accepted his comfort. She had a feeling she would need it.

She did. Antares' door was locked again, the frame practically bulging with the over-expanded door, the hinges looking distinctly stressed. When Bella touched it, she could have sworn it shocked her. Somehow, she found the determination to open the door anyway – there was no point running away from this, was there? Antares was her son – hers too. She just couldn't see how she was going to manage him now, along with Severus, and it –

"Go away," Antares said, slowly, and it hurt Bella to pretend that she hadn't heard it. But she had to, to speak rationally, to not demand that he recognise her as his mother and turn and *face* her instead of –

Bella cut herself off. She had to do this, to apologise for herself. "I shouldn't have given up on our conversation, I know –"

"I don't know why you're even bothering now," Antares spat. "You don't want to be with me now, anyway – you just want *him* –"

"That's not –"

"You're such a fucking liar when it suits you!" Antares said angrily, whipping round to face her, the result of the action almost worse than when he'd refused to look at her at all. "If you really want me, then why –"

"Don't use that tone with me," Bella found herself saying. "Don't you *dare*. I love you, and my relationship with Severus does *not* change that –"

“You don’t care about me,” Antares insisted, turning away again, his small form looking even smaller as he did so. “Leave me –”

“Don’t be silly,” Bella whispered, advancing on his bed – their bed – as if drawn by some magnetic force. “Antares, you’re my son. I love you, and I always will.” Antares twitched as if in answer, and Bella took that as a sign, sitting down on the bed as closely as possible to him and encircling him with her arms. “I’m sorry if I ever gave you...another impression, Antares. Please.”

Antares gave the smallest of nods, relaxing in Bella’s arms only slightly, but that was enough to make her want to smile around her frustration and panic, enough to make her press a wistful kiss into his hair. He sagged into her arms then, and Bella sighed with relief, tightening her arms around him and stroking his hair possessively, hoping he was listening to the murmured words of guilt and love.

It was painful to have to pry herself from her son’s grip, after a while, but Bella did it anyway. Her visit to Quality Quidditch might have to wait, but work could not.

The best part of leaving the house, though, was Antares creeping down by her side, silently making her meal, and, in a tone that was somehow too careless, asking when she would be back.

Bella paused, then, unable to stop herself from smiling. “Five-ish, if Malkin’s isn’t too busy. With a catalogue, too – the one from Quality Quidditch, remember?” From the surprised look on his face, he didn’t. “Severus said the school might pay a little towards your broom, since you’ll be on the Quidditch team, so I’ll be able to get you something nicer than I planned.” Crossing over to where he stood stock still by the stove, Bella pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, and Apparated away feeling like the sun was pouring slowly into her veins. Antares had looked – hopeful, just as she’d left. Not angry, and certainly not despairing like he’d been in his – in their room. They would be all right, she just knew it.

They would be all right.

A/N: Of course, whether Bella, Severus and Antares will be all right is debateable, but I’ll leave you to ponder that.

Speaking of pondering, I'm really glad I'm done – I'm done! Like, really! I nearly can't believe it, but I'm done with this chapter, and can't wait to do the next one. Hope you liked it (please DO tell me so, whether you did or didn't – all comments are welcome), and hope you like the next one!

Oh, and I found a way around the horizontal rule issue - I'm just copying them in, now. Blasted grumbles faintly off into the distance

Chapter 2: The Second Problem

Antares didn't know if he'd ever felt this bewildered in his entire life. Even now, after forcing himself to eat something at the stiff, strange breakfast with Snape, he still felt confused. This wasn't how a holiday was supposed to go. Christmas had been because of the Cloak, and though the Cloak was here now, Antares hadn't been alarmed by anything this summer – anything, perhaps, apart from the fact that Wigtown seemed to be in the midst of a horrendous losing streak.

Antares sighed, forcing himself to focus on finding more parchment. Even with the embarrassment of listening to Wigtown go down to the abysmal Chudley Cannons, his summer had been fun up to this point, just like any holiday should have been. Holidays were *supposed* to be fun, not full of Incidents smack dab in the middle of them, not full of fear or disgust or any of the rest of it. It simply wasn't supposed to be this way, and that had been the only thing he could think of that hadn't changed in the last few hours.

Sadly, everything else thought it fit to whirl around him until he was dizzy. Antares still felt dizzy now, hours after the horrible scenes with Bella – all of them packed improbably into yesterday afternoon and yesterday evening. There was nothing else for him to feel but that strange sense of nothing being quite in its place – of the world bending away from him every time he tried to grab hold of it. Sitting down on his bed to write a new pair of his usual shaky, silly letters to Blaise and Tracey felt like the one thing that was constant this morning. And yet, though Antares had still gathered his tattered quill and half-empty bottle of ink and begun to unroll the roll of parchment he'd found, he could think of nothing to write.

Or, at least, nothing he wanted to write about.

Antares scowled, then grimaced. It just – how on *earth* would he be able to explain this to his friends? To anyone? Thinking of the few things Snape had bothered to say to him at breakfast this morning, Antares did realise now that one of them had been something about keeping it all secret, but he didn't give a bull's bollocks about that. He bloody needed to tell someone. *Anyone*. And though right now it

looked hard, he wouldn't cower in the corner and stop trying just because Mum wanted him to.

So he dipped the nib of his quill in the precariously perched ink bottle, used his wand to slice off a respectable length of parchment for the first letter, and began.

Dear Blaise, Antares wrote quickly, I was glad to hear you didn't go to those stupid balls – I knew you'd have hated it. You asked about my Summer, right? Well, let me tell you to be honest it's going to the dogs, because... There, Antares stopped. How to go on from there, he didn't know. Crossing out that sentence, he tried to write it again – perhaps it would be easier if he was more direct – *Well, it's crap now. Snape Bella is being –*

No. Bloody no, that just sounded silly – she wasn't being anything except irritating and ignoring Antares and anyway –

He didn't want that in his letter. Rubbing furiously at his watering eyes, Antares cut off the top part of the letter and crumpled it off. He'd just start again, in a minute. Yeah. It was hard, but he could do it, he knew he could.

Hard my arse, Antares thought ten minutes later, scratching furiously at his hair as he tried to get past the new introduction of his letter, *this is – this is bloody IMPOSSIBLE!*

And it was. Really, how was he supposed to say it?

"Dear Blaise," Antares said, out loud, because it was just so silly, "my – Mum and Snape are shagging." Antares paused – that was just so *wrong*, so – maybe another – "Blaise, I just – I think it's likely that...Professor Snape is fucking my mum."

In a minute, Antares was tearing the letters to pieces with more anger than he thought he had in himself, and fighting the impulse to burn the shreds. What was he thinking, trying to tell anyone? No one would ever understand, so no one would know. He'd hidden things before – he was *still* hiding things. The fact that he could speak to snakes, for one.

He reared off the bed, trying hard to suppress the thought that Bella might not have meant everything she'd said to him about that – it had felt marvellous not to have her stare at him in fear and demand that he be tested to see that he wasn't hearing voices of his own volition. But now, after everything, he couldn't help but think –

No. Antares threw the torn bits of parchment into the bin, harder than he needed to, as if they were the poisonous thoughts biting him everywhere now. He took a moment to encourage them to shift well towards the particularly forgetful part of his mind, and had just about accomplished it when he suddenly remembered that this was another problem. And, after a moment, Antares realised that he had no intention of talking to his mother about Occlumency, whatever happened.

Antares' shoulders drooped. Was he a liar, then – just like Bella? Just like her? Climbing into his bed did not comfort him, and neither did the act of shoving his hastily closed ink bottle into the open drawer of his shabby bedside table. Jamming himself against the headboard, Antares finally let his shoulders drop and let his head fall into his hands, feeling like the frustration of it all would pull him apart. God, he felt so fucking selfish feeling like this, but how else was he – how else could he feel? Despite the way Bella's apology had felt earlier on, all he could feel when he thought of his one big secret from her was satisfaction. Triumph. She bloody well thought she held all the cards, even when she didn't – like any other adult, really. Just trying to control –

But no. *She said she loved me...*

Really, the sarcastic part of him said, deep within his mind. Enough to hide the fact of her fucking Snape from you? Enough to not listen to you about those spells?

Antares exhaled, trying to flush out the resentment in him and failing. Morgana, but he was ungrateful. She was out there picking up a frigging broom catalogue for him, for God's sake! *If only I could just – why couldn't I just –*

But no, again. No. Antares shook his head decisively to himself, not caring whether he looked silly. It was only fair, really – wasn't it? She

never wanted him to know anything, did she? Merlin, the way she'd looked at him down in the garden, like he was sprouting – like he was sprouting *Killing Curses* from his hands. Like he was so different to what she expected that she wanted to exchange him for someone else.

Like she didn't want him to be like her. Antares took a deep breath, wrestling with that thought as he'd wrestled with it then. *That*, Antares thought, *I will never understand*. He truly didn't – Bella was so strong, so self-assured, so composed...was it wrong that Antares wanted to be like her? To gain a reputation of being not someone to be messed with? It wasn't like he was going to join some Dark Lord or anything – *the* Dark Lord hadn't come back yet, and despite all Bella's warnings and narrowed looks, Antares was inclined to think that that wouldn't be happening anytime soon. If ever – if the Dark Lord went around picking idiots like Quirrell to do his dirty work, his return looked even less likely, in Antares' opinion. Which meant no one would be interested in comparing the mad bastard's *locking spells* with Antares' own.

Which, by extension, meant Antares would be fine using whatever spells he liked, whether his mother liked it or not. Antares straightened slowly, running the decision over in his mind. While he didn't like disobeying Bella so directly, there were just times when to do so was far more convenient than to stay in the large box of rules Bella had built up for his education and safety.

Besides, surrendering Occlumency would mean surrendering the Cloak, and Antares was just not prepared to do that, ever, to anyone.

Especially to his mum, when she'd been lying to him for – he didn't even know how long.

Scowling, Antares gathered up the remaining parchment and directed it over to his trunk with a slow, careful wave of his wand. As always, he felt a flash of pride; he'd gotten really good at levitating things, practicing as he did all the time. It made him wonder whether levitation and Summoning Charms were similar somehow, and made him automatically try to levitate something with just his hands. It didn't work – his battered quill stayed firmly where it was on his duvet no

matter how much he concentrated or anything, and it wasn't until Antares gave into the impulse and just called it to him instead that it moved, fluttering into his hand.

Frowning, Antares set it back on the bed. *Maybe I'm not trying hard enough, or have to say something out loud...*

The morning seemed to flash by Antares then, as he sat on his bed and tried not to shout at the stupid feather that wasn't bloody moving when he tried to levitate it on his own, without a wand. Well, it moved a little – sort of shifted around on the duvet, as if something was tugging at it, but that wasn't what he wanted –

“*Wingardium Levi-bloody-osa!*” Antares yelled for what seemed like the thousandth time, wanting to hit something. The door opened abruptly, and it made him jump and reach for his wand just as the quill shot into the –

Antares froze, and though he would have desperately liked to fling some sort of insult at Snape's ugly face as he poked his greasy head round the door, he was far too absorbed in keeping the quivering object floating in the air.

“What are you –”

“Shut up!” Antares hissed, but it was too late. The quill fell abruptly to the bed, and Antares' desire to hit something began to feel like an overpowering need. “What the fuck do you want?”

Snape didn't seem to be listening to him, just staring at the quill where it lay on the bed, bent and scratched as it had ever been. “What – were you doing that wandlessly?”

“None of your business,” Antares said, sliding off the bed, wanting the greasy, lecherous *bastard* out of his room. “Get out.”

Snape just gave him a derisive look, as he'd feared. “Don't be ridiculous,” he said calmly. “This *is* my house.”

“And my mum's paying for it, is she?” Antares snarled. “You're just using her, aren't you?”

“Don’t be any more foolish than you already are, boy,” Snape said coolly. Dangerously. “We both know that your mother is the last person –”

“Not if she was under the *Imperius!*” Antares burst out, his hands positively itching to wrap around Snape’s disgusting greasy neck. He knew it was stupid, but it – it just didn’t – Snape was so *ugly!* Mum never went for that kind of bloke –

“Oh, yes,” Snape said, almost companionably, now practically gliding into the room. “Makes perfect sense, doesn’t it? I’d risk my position at Hogwarts – my very *freedom*, in fact, just to have one woman under my control,” he continued, his tone scathing. “And of course I wouldn’t bother to put you under it as well, despite the security risk –”

“You –”

“Do not insult me by suggesting such a farce again,” Snape spat, advancing on Antares in a way that meant consequences if he was not obeyed. “Your mother is not a fool, and I am not desperate enough to risk an Unforgivable for the sake of my cock! Suggest such a thing again, and I will make you *wish* I’d committed such gross acts of stupidity.” Antares glared at him, refusing to back down in that, at least. “*Is that clear?*”

Antares didn’t want to, but he forced the words out anyway. “Yes, *sir.*”

Snape gave him a poisonous look at that, but instead of leaving, returned his attention to the quill that still lay on Antares’ bed. “Now, I asked you a question –”

“One that’s none of your business,” Antares said, as calmly as he could. “I’ll do what I like with my property –”

“And wandless magic, they say, is the sign of a Dark wizard,” Snape said, quietly. “So you *will* tell me why you were actively performing it, or you will know the reason why.” There was a clear threat in those words, and one that Antares knew he dared not challenge.

Antares looked away. “That stuff about wandless stuff being Dark,” he said, hating himself for complying, “it’s all rot. I’ve been doing it since

I was – what, five, six? If anything, they should teach people to start early on, it's dead useful."

"Your *wandless stuff*," Snape said derisively, "was not what you just performed; I saw it. Or do you wish to accuse me of being blind as well as stupid?" Antares kept his gaze on the ground, not understanding why on earth the man was just badgering on and on and *on* about this – "Speak up, boy – tell me what you were doing!"

"It was just levitation!" Antares exclaimed, feeling curiously cornered as he did so, with the way Snape was looming over him now. "I – I was just trying, that's all, I didn't mean –"

"What were you trying?"

"The Levitation Charm is a Charm, just like the Summoning one," Antares said slowly, starting to feel exasperated. What was so hard about understanding that? "I just – they're similar, I thought I could do them both without a wand, that's all." Antares shot Snape a glare, irritated at how the man was beginning to pace, as if it was some huge problem, him practicing wandless magic. "Bet *you* can't do them both –"

Somehow, that stopped Snape in place; it actually silenced him, like nothing else had. Snape gave him a long, considering look – one well-laden with the sort of piercing Legilimency Antares did not try to even defend himself against. The familiar feeling of his thoughts being touched on ended quickly, but Snape's gaze did not.

"I cannot do them both," Snape said slowly. "You are correct."

Somehow, the soft, thoughtful quiet of that statement took away Antares' vindictive pleasure at the actual words. He looked down at his hands, wanting to stop seeing those eyes on him, wanting to stop seeing that calculating gaze –

"It is very...strange," Snape said, finally. He began to move toward the door. "Inform me if you continue to succeed."

"And Mum?" Antares prompted sullenly, not quite sure why he was asking. Or what.

Snape's eyes glittered strangely. "Of course." When he shut the door behind him, Antares reached for the comforting warmth of his wand, wishing he'd come off better in their argument, but knowing it was probably inevitable that he lose.

Scowling, Antares poked hard at the quill – he faintly remembered Bella saying she liked that unwillingness to back down in a man, once, to that old woman they'd kept visiting every year. "*They have to have something...extra,*" Bella had said decisively. "*Definitely. I mean, how could I endure a weakling?*" Antares remembered listening, remembered running through the short list of men she'd ever seemed to take a liking to, remembered thinking decisively that they must all have been weaklings, for his mother to let them go. God, he remembered *agreeing* – there'd been one particular person that Bella had been able to drive off forever with just a look. That certainly wasn't Snape – if anything, Antares thought he was *too* strong.

It only took a moment to have it, but the realisation that his mother might have a valid reason to – to fuck *Snape*, of all people, was the most disgusting thing he'd ever thought, and he soon buried it deep in his mind, with only one or two threads of association clinging feebly to it.

"*Wingardium Leviosa,*" Antares snapped at the quill, then, just for something else to bloody think about, and he was shocked to see it rise jerkily into the air. He soon forgot the ugly truth that he'd buried inside himself, and lost himself in the demanding pursuit of extending his hold on the quill to more than just a few seconds of it hovering above the bed.

Antares scowled, but could not look away. Why on earth had he chosen to come down at this particular moment, anyway? There was nothing here that he remotely wanted to see, nothing – nothing except Snape slobbering all over his mum like he was a dog and she a bone. It was disgusting, and even more so because Antares could nearly not look away from it. Angry at it all, he finally stamped down the stairs, pushing rudely past them both and banging into the kitchen, where he began to serve their cooling dinner, feeling angrier when he realised that Snape had probably made it.

No, Antares thought snidely, watching his mother quirk a smile at the bastard, *that* Severus *made it*. He looked away when Bella passed closely beside him, and tried not to flinch when she ruffled his hair with the same hand that she might have been *touching* 'Severus' with. When Antares thought of where exactly his mum might have been touching that – that *bastard*, he wanted to be sick.

"Antares?" Bella called out, oblivious to the narrow glare Antares could not help but exchange with Snape. "I – I think I left the catalogue on one of the side tables in the living room. Fetch it, will you?"

"*Accio*," Antares said, defiantly, reaching for it with a single-minded determination, not caring the way his mother's face fell as he did so. There was no way that he was going to leave them alone, not in here. Morgana knew what they'd do – start touching each other, and then kiss, and maybe try to ruffle his hair again with sticky, disgusting hands. The catalogue thudded firmly into Antares' hands, and he could very nearly not keep himself from slamming it down onto the kitchen table.

"Antares –"

"You said to fetch it, Mum, didn't you?" Antares said, his tone perilously close to sweet. "This way...it saves time, doesn't it?"

Bella sighed, rising up from the seat which she'd sunk into after retrieving a glass from one of the cupboards. "Just..." she trailed off into another side. "About that catalogue – if you want something new, we'll only be able to afford something of lower quality, which probably won't give you as much speed as you like –"

"They actually have a used section?" Antares said, surprise warring with anger within him. She was ignoring it, obviously, just pretending like he hadn't Summoned the thing on purpose – "I only ever saw new stuff in there."

"It's order only," Bella said quietly, coming over to gently take the catalogue from him. Minutes later, she'd flipped it open to the correct page. "I got the impression that they wouldn't have told me if I hadn't insisted, but..."

“God, there are used Nimbus 2000s out already?” Antares said, interrupting on purpose. Bella turned away, still ignoring him.

“I’m not sure where they get their stock,” she said, pausing to thank ‘Severus’ as he set a plate before her with the most sickeningly soft look on his face. “But I’m sure they’re reputable – if they aren’t, we can always go to the modifications shop in Knockturn.”

“Boy, leave that and sit down to eat,” Snape said, and then Antares had to obey, as Bella was giving him a hard look, as if it wasn’t just about her making him sit down. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten about your little escapade in your room – tell her, now.”

“Severus, please,” Bella said, a little uselessly, because the next moment she’d turned to Antares and was eyeing him speculatively, and there was nothing for it but to tell her about what he’d been doing almost all day. When asked for a demonstration, Antares fought back a sneer and instead levitated Snape’s plate almost into his face, pretending shock when some food spilled on him.

Unfortunately, Snape didn’t even seem to care. “I saw him levitating a quill, this morning –some time after you’d left,” he said, sounding almost – almost *excited*. “And now –”

“– he’s levitating plates,” Bella said, looking terribly astonished. “My goodness! I know he’s always been a quick study, but –”

“Would you mind not talking about me like I’m not here?” Antares said, through gritted teeth. “And anyway, it’s not like *he* helped – he just stood there and told me people think wandless magic is Dark, and everything.”

Bella exchanged a look with Snape. “Well, it *is* considered Dark, but mostly because the wizards famed for it were mostly of that leaning,” she said carefully. “It just means – learning it so quickly – I’m not exactly sure, but it should indicate that you’ll be powerful, when you grow –”

That surprised Antares, enough that he couldn’t stop himself from saying, in a maliciously innocent tone, “More than *Severus*, then?”

Bella gave him a *look*. "It's hard to tell," she said coolly, exchanging a glance with Snape, who was now glaring at Antares. "Just make sure you don't do it in front of –"

"Mum, I'm not stupid!"

"Then it fails me to think why you've been behaving like that all dinner," Bella snapped, setting her cutlery down with a nervous, angry movement. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you –"

"Then stop telling me!" Antares shoved himself away from the table so hard that his hands hurt, and made to pick up his plate so he could take it into the sink and just go, but Bella's voice stopped him.

"Antares, stop this. For goodness' sake, we're a family –"

"Not with him," Antares spat, pointing to Severus. When Bella made to rise, looking almost as agitated as she'd been last night, Antares shot up and bolted, slamming the door behind him. Once in his room, it was hard to keep himself from shouting the locking spell at his door again, but he knew Bella would hear again, and it would just make her more unhappy.

Instead, Antares got into his bed and burrowed down under the covers, after searching frantically for the Invisibility Cloak and stuffing it into his pockets. Whatever happened, he was keeping it, all right? Whatever happened.

It didn't take long for him to have to pretend he wasn't crying.

Days passed, Antares' anger only growing with each one as his mother made increasingly little effort to keep her activities with Snape hidden. Antares spent each day up in his room practising needlessly, sometimes choosing to ignore Bella's suggestions that they go on with their lessons, sometimes forced to stand about and try to hex her because she was too fed up to leave him alone that particular time. Snape kept tabs on him mercilessly, constantly making snide comments about Antares' wand work and wandless work, and occasionally telling him he was being a fool about everything.

Antares scowled, knowing the bastard would say something to that effect when he found out that Antares hadn't bothered to show Bella his most recent letter from Hogwarts. He didn't care – he just wanted to make life as difficult for his mum as she was making it for him daily, and he knew the added stress of scrambling to buy school things would add to it. Not that he actually wouldn't mind forgetting about half the purchases on the list – nearly all of the books were by Gilderoy Lockhart, whom Antares had only heard of in conjunction to Witch Weekly's many useless contests. Antares would rather buy fifty kneazles than spend a Knut on such nonsense (just looking at the titles was enough – *Year with the Yeti*, honestly), and anyway he was far more interested in using some of the money he'd saved by not buying new stuff last year for a better cause: his new broom.

Aside from thinking up horrid insults he would probably never say to Snape's face, Antares had recently occupied himself in weighing the features and pricing of every broom within his means in the now slightly battered Quality Quidditch catalogue. That was what he was doing now – at the moment, he was scrutinising every feature of a lightly used Comet 260 on offer and wishing half-heartedly that he had Blaise to decipher some of them for him. A lot of the features made sense, but the others? He snorted – it was all, "*uplift enhanced, 1987...tracking modified, 1970-71...braking failed, re-engineered 1989...balancing mechanism recalibrated, 1990...*" –it was ridiculous! If only he could write to Blaise...

Antares shifted guiltily in his seat, at that. He hadn't written to Blaise in a bit, or to Tracey – the whole conflict with Snape and Mum had killed any desire to do so, really. Tracey, at least, would have sensed that something was wrong probably just from looking at his handwriting, and she'd have Floo called Blaise about that faster than anything, and then he'd have had both of them on his back when he finally got to school, or maybe even earlier, if he met them on a trip to Diagon Alley. It was useless, all of this, Antares thought angrily, shutting the catalogue. Why couldn't anything be simple, just for once?

"Up already?" His mother's tired voice startled him, nearly out of his seat. Antares kept his eyes on the catalogue, guilt freezing him as he noted the weariness in her expression and posture, as she came up

behind him, bending to read over his shoulder as if they hadn't been shouting at each other half last night. "Oh my goodness, I *still* didn't remember this," Bella said, interrupting Antares' thought stream by carelessly catching up the catalogue. "Antares, you should have reminded me! I've been meaning to sort this out for a week, now," she murmured, seemingly oblivious to the way Antares was fidgeting guiltily, now. "We'll need to go down there today, then – I've the day off from Malkin Malkin, so we can get your school things together..."

Antares gulped. "Er – mum, about that –"

Bella's smile did more to cut him off than the finger she put to his lips. "Now, Antares, I know you didn't want to bother me about them since things are so busy at Malkin's, now, but they *are* important – I appreciate your not saying anything about them, but I'd rather you told me next time, all right?"

Bella's tone was soft, fond, as if Antares had really done something like that. With a jolt, Antares suddenly realised who had probably brought this about, who had been in and out of his room constantly all week. The thought that Snape might have covered up for him made him feel even more painfully guilty as Bella reached down to give his shoulder a squeeze and set about searching for something to eat. How on earth had he been stupid enough to leave the school letter lying about in his room? Surely Snape had eventually seen it. Now he just knew the bastard would come up and give him another one of those 'talks', black eyes skewering him mercilessly all the way through.

It was all Antares could do to stand up and help, then, especially when Snape appeared just minutes after Bella had relinquished control of the pan to Antares, looking thoroughly dishevelled, and sporting what, to Antares' horror, looked like a bite mark on his neck. As Antares was processing that horror, another – an indecently long morning kiss – was perpetrated right behind him, complete with disgusting murmuring that he couldn't hear. Antares gritted his teeth and jabbed at the bacon in the pan, imagining he was far older and far stronger, and that it was Snape's ugly head he was hitting with something.

Somehow, though, it didn't make him feel any better. If Antares wasn't able to keep Snape from mucking up his plans *now*, when was he ever going to be strong enough to kick him out of Bella's life?

"Hurry up, will you, Dalwell?" Bella snapped. "For goodness' sake, I don't bite –"

Antares sighed. He and Mum were currently in the apothecary next to Borgin and Burke's, where she was proceeding to frighten the hell out of a rather tired-looking Tim for what seemed, to Antares, like no reason at all. Honestly, he'd just dragged his feet a bit, just to look in at Borgin's like he always did, and upon commenting that he could see Draco Malfoy in the shop, had nearly had his arm dragged out of his socket as Bella whisked him off into the apothecary. Now, Bella was bristling with some emotion that Antares did not want to acknowledge, and it made her snappish, enough that Tim, the clerk, looked enormously relieved to see the back of them when they left, Antares clutching his old cauldron closely and trying to keep up with his mum's swift pace.

As soon as they stepped into Diagon Alley, Bella was at it again, dragging him sideways into the Magical Menagerie without so much as a by-your-leave, then shunting him down towards the snake section, her eyes on the street outside them. It didn't take a moment for Antares to realise that he was face-to-face with the one thing he didn't want to think about at that moment, and even less time to realise that he didn't have a say in whether or not he could just move to another section. For Bella was right next to him, pressed heedlessly between two rat cages so that she could see out of the window they were stacked in front of. Antares' heart sank.

For a minute, he tried uselessly to convince himself that he could squeeze past his mother (who seemed to have turned to stone, so intent was she on whatever she was looking for). Antares soon gave up that train of thought, his only concession to action being to fidget carefully in place (he didn't want to touch the cages, thanks – much less touch one of the snakes) and mutter inwardly to himself about why on earth so many unfairly strange things happened to him.

Because, Antares thought, with a gulp, the snakes were waking u –

I'm so cramped, one said, from a tiny cage near the top. *These humans, so smelly –*

Yess, the snakes all hissed, making Antares jump. *Smelly.*

It's frankly keeping me awake, a rather large one said from behind him, its yellow coils making a dry, slithering sound as they moved over one another. *This one is smellier, too.*

I'm not, Antares almost said, indignantly, before he realised what he was doing. The clerk on duty was eyeing him sympathetically as he fought the urge to turn round and round, so fast were the short, confusing conversations going.

“Scared of snakes, young sir?” she asked lowly. “Don’t feel too bad – I’ve been here a year, can’t stand them myself –”

Look! She! Is she feeding us? the snakes exclaimed. They all began to slither close to the front of their cages, some of them eyeing Antares with interest as he somehow found himself shaking his head. Though he tried to ignore it, the desire to tell them to shut up and calm down was unnervingly strong, because wasn’t it obvious that ‘She’ wasn’t carrying anything? Antares felt his mouth open, the desire was so strong, but he immediately made himself shut it, ignoring how all the snakes were now staring at him and insulting the way he wasn’t doing anything.

“Antares, come,” Bella ordered, suddenly, and Antares was only too glad to edge away, before he did something very stupid. “So sorry, Heidi – we’re trying to surprise someone, that’s all –” And after a few slightly tense words about birthdays and the problem of what to give a man for one, Bella was hustling them out onto the street and straight to the right. Antares didn’t even have a moment to ask anything before they were darting into Madam Malkin’s, which was busy with students and their parents. Bella kept her head low, which worried Antares – what was she so afraid of? This was her workplace – he didn’t understand –

“Bella? ‘S that you?” A tallish, nervous-looking girl that seemed to be one of the staff had spotted them, and was coming their way. “Thought you were on –”

“Minnie, I’m so sorry – I need to make an urgent Floo call, and I couldn’t think –”

The girl’s bewilderment immediately turned to sympathy while Antares’ bewilderment remained resolutely intact. “Oh, sorry, of course, it’s all right –”

“Antares?” Bella suddenly said, conversationally, as Minnie began to lead them toward what Antares thought must be the back of the shop. “Would you mind terribly if you went on to the bookshop without me?”

“What? But you said I wasn’t to –”

“Not that one, dear,” Bella said sharply, nodding with gratefulness at Minnie, who actually winked at her as she left them in a tiny room with a hearth and a pot of Floo powder and what seemed like a hundred mannequins. “Flourish and Blott’s – here, take this –”

Antares’ confusion grew as Bella took his cauldron from him, setting it down on the floor with a hasty thump, which made the mannequins squeal and knock into each other in their haste to get away from it. Bella, however, didn’t bat an eye at them, now rummaging through her robe pockets as if that were the most important thing in the world. It was at that point that Antares began to worry – she’d never failed to be distracted and irritated by the horrid, squealing squirmy mannequins before, and right now they were at their squirmiest.

Bella soon found what she was looking for, and drew it out, confusing Antares further. Wasn’t that their Gringotts – “Antares, did you hear me? Take this,” she said, cramming what felt like far too many Galleons into his hand, “and go in to Flourish and Blott’s.”

Antares stared at her. Was she mad? “But Mum, their prices,” he tried to say, unwilling to pocket the money, especially when he saw his mother heft the remaining money in the bag in one hand, her eyes far away. “If you need to make a call, I can always go down to the Knockturn bookshop on my own –”

At that she seemed to snap back to life. “Absolutely not,” Bella said decisively. “Look, I can’t send you down to Knockturn on your own, you know that –”

Antares tried not to stare down at the coins in his hand. Why was she being so paranoid today? “Mum, we were *in* Knockturn just minutes ago! I don’t see –”

“Lucius Malfoy was in Borgin’s, Antares, didn’t you see him?” Bella whispered furiously, her sharp words filling Antares with fear and dismay. He remembered seeing someone with pale hair in Borgin’s, now, but he hadn’t thought to connect it then – “And I – if we’d stayed a moment extra on the street, he might have seen us –”

Antares paled. Then why on earth was she trying to send him to *Flourish and Blott’s*, for goodness’ sake, when they were in danger? “Shouldn’t we be going home...?”

“Not until you’ve gotten your books, young man,” Bella said, determination sharp and hard on her face as she pulled deftly on the drawstring of the moneybag to close it. “I simply won’t have time before you start term, and owl order is expensive,” she continued, bending down to embrace him fiercely. “Just – just keep your head down, and stay away from Lucius if you see him, though I doubt he’ll be in Flourish already when I saw him head down into the Leaky Cauldron.”

“From the Menagerie?” Antares asked, confused – *he’d* never been able to see as far as the Leaky from there – “But –”

“There are ways of watching, Antares,” Bella whispered into his ear. She straightened after a minute, her movements reluctant. “If we’re lucky, the bastard’s already gone – I saw his son beside him, at any rate, so it’s likely,” she said, beginning to pace the tiny space in small, quick steps. “I nearly don’t want to send you, but there was a crowd outside Flourish. You won’t be spotted in there if you’re careful, and I *know* you are.” Bella said the last bit fiercely, enough that Antares’ heart swelled with pride. “Just – keep your head down, and if you’re not sure of something, or if you see the Malfoys, just leave.”

“I know, Mum,” Antares said quietly, his heart squeezing tight with fear and anticipation. “I’ll be careful.”

“Good,” Bella said, looking a lot like she didn’t want him going at all, but had no choice but to let him. “Come quickly, will you? If you’re not back in twenty minutes –”

“– you’ll come after me,” Antares finished. He began stuffing the money in his pockets as well as he could, given that his hand was shaking. “I’ll be fine, Mum.”

“If you see him, just leave – do you understand?” Bella’s face was flushed with what looked frighteningly like fear, but her tone was stern. Determined. “Come back to me.”

Antares nodded again, and was standing outside on the street before he’d even thought about what he was doing. He moved quickly, careful to make his stride carefree as he approached Flourish and Blott’s, which, as Bella had said, was crowded.

Crammed is more like it, Antares thought irritably, as he shoved his way inside. It was packed bizarrely tight, and there seemed to be an excited witch everywhere Antares turned. It was with difficulty that he got to the used section, peering over his shoulder as he did for the slightest sign of pale hair, but he was soon too busy browsing to look. He doubted, anyway, that someone would spot him in all this crush; there were that many people in the bookshop that it was difficult to get at the books, much less the people. Although there weren’t half as many people patronising the used section – it was just Antares, four or five witches, and a red-haired girl that looked as if she might be shorter than him, frowning at two books that she seemed to be comparing. As Antares drew closer, he realised she was holding *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1* – or was holding two copies of it, anyway – and therefore must be somewhere near where the –

Ah. *Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2*. Antares snagged three copies off the shelf and examined them closely before choosing the second one he’d taken. As he re-shelved them, he glanced quickly at his list, wanting to know what was – oh, of course, the *Lockhart* books. He’d seen a lot of them out on display as he’d entered the shop, for some reason – no idea why anyone would voluntarily buy that sort of shite. Antares sighed and got to looking for them anyway, half-hoping there wouldn’t be any of them here in the used section.

Unluckily for him, it didn't take long to find a rather large section of the used copies of what looked like everything Lockhart had ever published. But after a minute of thumbing through *Travels with Trolls*, Antares could see that Lockhart's stuff wasn't worth the few Sickles it would probably sell for here, much less the Galleons Flourish and Blott's would charge for the new, unused copies. It was all nonsense about how Lockhart had single-handedly tracked and taken down some sort of Troll tribe – nonsense that seemed even more nonsensical when Antares thought back to his own rather scary battle with a mountain Troll in first year. There hadn't been any "*piteous screams of anguish*", "*drawn out wails of surrender*" or any sort of begging at all, and no amount of scrutinising Lockhart's stupid blond curls or squinting at the improbably descriptions could make Antares understand how the man had won his dubious victory. Giving up, Antares glared at the author, a blond, supremely irritating man, before shoving the book back where it belonged, taking delight in the fist the picture shook at him as he crumpled the binding.

A half-hearted browse through the rest of Lockhart's 'collection' left Antares only more determined not to buy any of his rubbish, so, hefting what looked to be his only purchase in one hand, Antares began comparing the excuses he could use when Bella asked him about the swathe of books he hadn't bought. He also began to head out of the used section, stopping occasionally to eye something that looked interesting. He was just forcing himself to move after staring for longer than was healthy at a horribly tantalizing book on duelling without wands when someone bumped into him, shaking him out of his thoughts.

It was the girl. "Excuse me," she said, a little pointedly, almost like it'd been his fault, when he could see she was so laden down with books that she couldn't see around them.

"Excuse you," he snapped, scowling at her. "Maybe you'd look where you're going if you weren't buried in that pile – that copy's missing a few pages, by the way, I'd bin that if I were you –"

"Really?" she said, scowling back, but Antares noticed that when he made to turn away, she dropped the copy he indicated. Antares rolled his eyes, giving the row of books by Lockhart no more than a cursory

glance before he left the used section. Bella wouldn't thank him for spending money on books that were so obviously bad, he knew that – he'd just borrow one from the library if he desperately needed one, or something.

Closing his eyes momentarily, Antares sighed. It wasn't the best of excuses, but it would do; at least he also had a way around being punished for not having the bloody books. He crumpled the school list into his pocket and headed for the cashier with a will, cursing at the way the crowd got thicker as he got closer to the frazzled-looking young man that was handling it all. By the time he'd reached the cashier, Antares was more than ready to be gone, enough that he didn't even bat an eye when he was told that there was no time to shrink his purchase down.

"Fair enough," Antares said, taking the receipt with a shrug. "You look busy enough as it is, anyway." The cashier shot him a look of understanding, then called out for the next customer, who made fair to shove Antares to the floor in their hurry to be attended to. To Antares' dismay, the book shot out of his hand, landing somewhere to his left with a thump and – and a squeal?

God, did it hit someone? Antares shoved blindly, trying to get to where he'd heard the squeal, but that only resulted in him colliding with what felt like a pile of books. Antares groaned inwardly as the books scattered – his luck just seemed to get worse and worse and –

"Just what the hell is your problem, eh?" someone said fiercely. Someone red-haired. Someone that looked like the girl from – *ah, shite*. The girl from the used section shot a glare at him as she huffily began to recover her books. Antares set to helping her immediately, ignoring the grumbling she was still doing. He knew he didn't have to, but quickly realised from the titles of the books still strewn about them that she was probably a first year, and therefore someone likely to be sorted into his house.

"Look, I'm sorry," he forced himself to say, handing her a somehow shrunken-looking copy of *Travels with Trolls*. The girl sniffed, but Antares kept on anyway – goodness knew he didn't want anyone bearing him grudges even before term started. "I was rushing – some

idiot knocked my book from my hands, I was just trying to get it back.” Antares straightened, lingering momentarily over *A History of Magic* – the book she’d replaced. Despite knowing that it would annoy her, he found himself unable to resist adding, “I see you replaced this – this copy’s certainly far better –”

“Didn’t replace it because of you,” the girl muttered, reddening in embarrassment. Antares shrugged, keeping an involuntary grin to himself. *God, she’s just like Blaise...* He handed the book over, and tried not to grin as she snatched it from him – again, just like Blaise. It was eerie, honestly. The glare she gave him now, though, didn’t seem like Blaise at all. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” Antares said blandly, looking around them. There weren’t any books left lying on the floor, so... “I’ll just be off, then. By the way, don’t bother asking the clerk to shrink them down, he’ll just say no.”

She sniffed. “That’s obvious, he’s really busy! I’m not stupid –”

“Didn’t say you were,” Antares said, rolling his eyes. *Blaise under Polyjuice! No, really!* It was hard not to smile, at the thought, but he managed it, keeping a straight face as he began to turn away from her. “Good luck at sorting, then.” Ignoring the way her eyes widened at that – *well, she’s a bit clueless, isn’t she? It’s bloody obvious she’s a first year, with those books* – Antares set off, now starting to hope she’d be in his house. Honestly, it would be worth it, just to see her and Blaise jockey it out. Then again, she did seem a bit stupider than Blaise – a little less quick on the uptake, maybe. But maybe that was because she was younger – god knew Blaise and even Tracey had been a pain in the arse like that, at times –

“Hey, you! *Black!*” Antares jumped. *God, please let that not be Draco*
–

But Antares’ luck, it seemed, had run out, for there was Draco, face red with anger, holding Antares’ new book up in his hand like a trophy. “I should’ve bloody known,” he spat, squeezing around a fat old woman that was dithering over another pile of books by Lockhart. “*Some people never get to respect their betters* –”

“And *some* people don’t know when to shut up and realise that accidents can and do happen,” Antares snapped, trying to grab hold of his book and failing. “Even if the accidents are the kind that’ll knock some sense into someone’s empty little head –”

“Take that *back*,” Draco demanded, holding the book steadily out of his reach. “Do it, or I’ll tear this –”

“You’ll tear a book with an Anti-Tear charm on, will you?” Antares replied boldly, knowing his lie would give Draco pause. It did, and in the next moment Antares had seized hold of the book, and was manfully trying to tug it out of Draco’s grasping, furious hands. “Go buy your own book, Draco!”

Draco nearly lost hold of the book at that. “Why, is this one even yours?” he snapped, scratching at Antares’ hands as he scrabbled for purchase. “Bet you stole it –”

“Did *not* –”

“You did! Theif, thief –”

“Shut *up*!” Antares shouted, finally wresting the tattered book from Draco’s hands. But it was too late – the old woman next to them had fixed her beady eye on him, and looked fair to take up the cry, which Draco was repeating as loud as he could.

“Thief, thief, THIEF–”

Antares tried to scramble away, but was shoved back towards Draco by the interfering old woman. “Shut up or I’ll make you, Malfoy!” he hissed desperately, trying to edge away. By now, more and more people were taking notice of them, and Antares really began to panic – wasn’t that one of the shop clerks, heading this way? God, but he wanted to *strangle* Draco – “I have a receipt,” Antares tried to say, as the old woman seized hold of him and tried to pry the book from his hand. “Look you – that’s *mine*!”

“See here, what on earth is going on?” someone said loudly from somewhere on Antares’ left. A fairly strong hand extracted the book from Antares’ hand, then, leaving him to struggle angrily with the

irritating old woman that was still holding him by the arms. “Draco, stop that boorish shouting this minute!”

Draco stopped. Antares felt the first whisper of fear in his heart – who could talk to Draco like that, and actually make him listen?

The old woman released Antares then, and he soon had the answer.

“You there – clerk! Hurry up – my son says this boy,” the blond man’s haughty gaze barely even landed on Antares, as if he was too filthy to take notice of, “is a thief.”

The hair. The eyes. It was Mr. Malfoy – had to be, as he’d just said he was Draco’s dad – and he was looming over Antares, his wand in his right hand, as if Antares was actually the sort of dangerous criminal that would need a wand trained on him. Antares’ heart, for a long moment, seemed to stop beating. God, Bella would *kill* him –

“You there, boy,” someone said from behind him. Antares turned, feigning anger – anything less would mark him guilty, he just knew it – “Do you have a receipt for this item?” Antares suddenly realised he was speaking to the cashier he’d paid to, at the counter, and that the man sounded weary.

Morgana be praised, Antares thought fervently to himself, choosing not to answer as he rummaged in his pockets for the receipt, giving every appearance of fury. “Of course I do! Draco’s lying; he’s always trying to get me in trouble –”

A cold hand seized hold of his shoulder, forcing him to turn about. “Excuse me?” Mr. Malfoy’s cold eyes stared him down, and for a moment, Antares’ tongue was literally still with fear.

Somehow, though, he made himself answer, using strength he didn’t even recognise to shake his shoulder out of the older man’s grip. “Excuse you, *sir*, but I was talking about your son. He tried to take my book, and when he couldn’t, he started shouting like *I* was the thief –”

“That’s not true!” Draco cried, pushing out from behind his father. “Father, he *threw* it at me on purpose –”

"If it hit you, it was a mistake," Antares insisted, scowling as fiercely as he could, despite the way his legs were shaking. Mr. Malfoy still had hold of his book, and was now leafing through the worn pages with a look of disgust on his face. "Someone bumped into me, and it flew out of my hands –"

"You're such a liar, Black," Draco snapped, fuming, and it was as if his words held some power, for Mr. Malfoy looked like he'd been turned to stone. "You threw it at me, and you know it!"

"If I may," the cashier said, impatiently, from behind Antares, "the boy's receipt is in order." Mr. Malfoy didn't move – it was as if he wasn't listening, so hard was he looking at Antares. "He's no more a thief than you are, Mr. Malfoy," the cashier continued, tapping Antares on the shoulder and thrusting his receipt into his face as he turned around. "I assume that's all, gentlemen. Now if you'll excuse me, I've customers to deal with." The cashier marched off with a look of serious irritation on his face, leaving Antares to fold his receipt and stuff it back into his pockets again and try to drum up the courage to demand his book back.

It turned out that he did not have to. "So, Mr. Black," Mr. Malfoy said slowly, extending the book back down to Antares, "it seems I owe you an apology."

"Thank you, sir," Antares said, hoping he sounded as cold as possible. He tried not to snatch at his book, but forced himself to reach out and take hold of it calmly. It did not budge. "Excuse me – if you could just –"

"Ah," Mr. Malfoy said, his eyes glittering with an emotion that made Antares even more uneasy, "so sorry. I was just wondering – you look so *familiar*, you see." Antares couldn't repress a slight shiver at the emphasis on that word. If only he could just snatch his book and be *gone* – "Are you any relation to the Blacks of Grimmauld Place?"

"Never heard of it," Antares said firmly, though it cost him to do so. "If you don't mind, I'd like my book back, please...?"

Mr. Malfoy's eyes were narrowed, and he looked like he wanted to do anything but that. "Of course," he said, after a moment, but did not

release the book. Antares, trying to feign irritation, was just about to tug properly at it when a commotion started behind them, towards the door.

Terror took hold of him, making him abandon propriety and pull the book from Lucius' hand. Bella would be so worried –

And, as if his thought had summoned her, there she was, shoving her way through the crowd with minimum exertion, using hard looks and harder suggestions to push people out of her way as her eyes scanned the room rapidly for Antares.

The sharp intake of breath from beside him was Antares' only warning that all was up. The next moment, a frighteningly strong hand had seized hold of his arm, ignoring how that knocked his book to the floor again. It was in that instant that Bella's searching eyes landed on them and widened, and made Antares know a shame that he'd never thought he'd be able to feel.

A shame that was replaced just as quickly by confusion, for if he was not mistaken, Bella had just smiled.

"Why, Lucius! Can that be you?" Bella called loudly, enough that people's heads swivelled in their direction. She was advancing on them now, hands outstretched as if in greeting, but really devoted to another purpose, which Antares soon found out. Draco exclaimed from nearby, and quite suddenly stumbled away from his father's side...right into Bella's arms.

Mr. Malfoy stiffened beside him, and Antares found it hard to hold back a whimper as the grip on his arm tightened. All eyes were on them now, especially on Bella, who was staring in feigned surprise at Draco, who was too still with fright to struggle in her arms.

"It *must* be you," Bella continued, in that loud, carefree tone, as if Lucius Malfoy had not just aimed his wand squarely at her head. "You know how I know? Because you have a son, and he is more like you than I could ever have imagined – look, the eyes! The *hair!*" Bella laughed gaily, ignoring the way Draco was trying to squirm out of her grip. She sighed, finally, as if she'd just enjoyed a wonderful joke. "Isn't he wonderful?" she asked, her gay tone now underlain with

something hard – something dangerous. “Narcissa must *love* him – does she?” And Bella drew her wand, to the gasps of everyone around them, and to Lucius’ own startled, almost nervous laughter.

“Of course she does,” he said, fondly, his wand lowering slowly. “How could you ever ask something so silly, Bellatrix?”

“Only it seems like she’d like to exchange,” Bella continued, as if she had not heard Mr. Malfoy. “Doesn’t she, Lucius? Else, you would not have chosen my son,” she went on, now tapping her wand on Draco’s shaking head, as if she was deep in thought. “He is a darling, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” was the strangled answer. Mr. Malfoy laughed again, but it contained a savage note, and made it sound terrible. “Why, yes – a veritable gentleman in his own right, your son.”

Bella only smiled, not about to be drawn into an answer. Mr. Malfoy cleared his throat, delicately. “Only, Bella – I’m afraid the – this exchange, the one you are proposing...it won’t do.”

Bella raised an eyebrow at him, looking shocked. “It won’t? But –”

“No, oh no – we simply must have Draco,” Mr. Malfoy said, almost a little too quickly, his grip tightening on Antares’ arm even more. “Blood son, you know, and all that.”

“Dear oh dear,” Bella said, and there was no hint of gaiety in her tone now. “And I was growing so *fond* of him.” She smiled, sweetly, as Mr. Malfoy let go of Antares, allowing him to stumble toward his mother as fast as he could. Draco was let go only when Antares had bridged more than half the distance between his pale, stiff father and Bella, and he almost fell, he was rushing so. Bella drew Antares to her side, her graceful manner belying the grip she had on his shoulder. “Always a pleasure, Lucius – we simply *must* do this again.” She turned, beckoning Antares after her with a simple twist of her hand. The silent, seething crowd parted for them unwillingly, many of them shooting such venomous looks in him and Bella’s direction that Antares pressed closer to her without even thinking.

However, it seemed that Mr. Malfoy was not quite finished with them, as his clear, cold tone halted them just as they reached the door. "Wait a moment, Bella – your son forgot something." Antares turned first, and was lucky he did so – the book would have injured him, flying as fast as it was. He caught it with a straight face, as if it hadn't hit his hand hard enough to nearly hurt him. Bella took it from him, turning back to give Mr. Malfoy a cold, poisonous smile.

"Much obliged, Lucius. See that you do not forget anything, either." And then they were out, and heading for Malkin's as quickly as was humanly possible. Bella's lips were drawn tight across her face, and she was beginning to breathe sharply, as if she'd just run a race. She didn't give him time to question her, though – one moment, they were out on the street, and the next, they had pushed through into Madam Malkin's with nary an apology for anyone they jostled, and were heading for the mannequin room with a will.

Antares flinched as they entered – the mannequins tried to gain Bella's attention by tapping her on the shoulder, but instead of merely ignoring them as she had done the first time, she whipped out her wand and stared them down with such a look of fury on her face that even Antares felt fear flicker within him.

"Pick up your cauldron," she snapped at him, and he did, only for her to seize his only purchase and thunk it into the half-empty cauldron, making the Potions ingredients clatter about inside. "Suppose I should be glad you didn't bother to buy everything – less to carry, isn't it?"

"Mum –"

"Shut up," Bella snapped, turning away from him, jostling the squealing, frightened mannequins out of her way as she tried to reach the Floo powder pot on the hearth in the corner. "Don't just stand there, Antares, come here!" Shaking, Antares did as he was told, only to have his cauldron seized out of his hands and have one of them crammed with Floo powder. "*Incendio!* Now go home, and be quick about it!" Antares, breathing hard, did as he was told, and was soon spinning dizzyingly fast, the grates flashing by sickeningly fast. He was in the hearth and in Snape's house almost before he realised

it, and began scrambling out of the hearth in a panic, sure that Bella would be there in seconds –

Crack. His mother appeared in the middle of the living room clutching his cauldron, looking so upset that it made Antares want to hide. It took a minute for Antares to force himself over to her, and, shaking with fear, try to pry the cauldron from her hands.

There was no need, for Bella had dropped it, hard, and was now nearly suffocating him with the strength of her hug. “Oh, god,” she whispered, her voice shakier than he had ever heard it, “so – so close. So close.” She sat down unceremoniously, dragging Antares to the floor with her, her arms only shifting around him as he tried to sit and kneel at the same time. “I’m so sorry – I shouldn’t have sent you, I’m such a *fool* –”

“Wasn’t your fault,” was all Antares could think to say, and it didn’t surprise him to find that his voice was as shaky as hers. “I – it was a mistake –”

“What’s going on?” Snape’s sharp tone seemed to slice into the silence, accompanied by the sound of his hurried footsteps. “Bella – what on earth...” A rustling could now be heard, as Snape bent down nearby, probably examining the mess Antares’ cauldron had made when Bella dropped it. The next moment, the man’s smelly, strong hands were prying Antares out of Bella’s grip to the sound of her tears, and forcefully dragging both of them to their feet. Antares was left to regain his balance as Snape coaxed Bella onto one of the sofas, and when he did so, he made to sit beside her. “Don’t be silly, boy – make yourself useful and fetch her something to drink!”

Antares gritted his teeth in anger, but one look at his mother’s shaking form had him heading for the kitchen on unsteady legs to do that very thing. She *did* need something to calm her down, and he wasn’t going to deny her that just because Snape had suggested it.

It didn’t take long for Antares to quickly decide that water wouldn’t do much to calm her down, and begin searching for some alternative. *Firewhiskey’ll be far too strong*, he thought, turning away from the small group of ugly red bottles clustered together in the pantry, *she needs calming down, not stirring up...* A search soon had him

deciding between an equally ugly electric-blue bottle of vodka and a plain one of what looked like cider. Minutes later, Antares was heading back into the living room, the cider bottle and a glass in tow. What he saw made him drop the bottle and edge for the stairs.

Snape was there, comforting Bella, all right – he was kissing her, so blatantly and so disgustingly, and she was *allowing* it, her arms flung round him, her eyes closed. It hurt to watch, to know that he'd been sent away just so this could happen, and it was painful enough that the glass went the way of the bottle, and that Antares didn't even pretend to listen to the cries of alarm that followed him up the stairs. In what seemed like no time at all, he was behind the door and they were on the other side. It didn't take a minute to whisper a savage *Offirmo – she deserves to cry*, Antares thought to himself, stepping away from the expanding door, his wand slipping out of his suddenly nerveless fingers.

Because really, how unfair was all this? Berating him in the shop when all he'd done was try to do what he was told... And now, this; letting that – that lecherous *bastard* send him away and slobber all over her. So he *could* slobber all over her, as if she were his, and Antares was just the errand boy that made meals and practiced spells in a corner of the house.

Fighting back tears, Antares got into his bed and crawled under the covers. If he cried here, he could pretend that he hadn't, since all he could see was dimness and dirty sheets. If he cried here, he could pretend that he hadn't given in, given up.

Antares closed his eyes. He could pretend.

A/N: Sorry, guys – cliff-hanger, much? Well, I suppose it's not too bad – there are worse ones than that this year, anyway – and I do think I should be able to have the next chapter up pretty soon. As always, I'd love to hear what you think. The next chapter is tentatively titled Mayhem, and may or may not include a newspaper article. Hope you liked this one, and hope you like the next – see you then!

Chapter 3: Consequences

The bewildering afternoon somehow eased into a calm night. Once Bella had stopped crying, she'd become ravenous for Severus' touch, and he'd given her all that he could. The boy, as usual, had startled them both at the beginning, breaking a bottle of good cider in the process, and though Bella had wanted to go after him, Severus had stopped her.

He still remembered it – how could he forget? “You need rest,” he'd said, willing his voice not to shake with the nervous emotion that told him that Bella wouldn't listen. “Go to bed,” he'd insisted, and somehow she had. And much later, at his own insistence, Severus had ended up being the one to walk carefully to Antares' door and try it.

The door had been locked with a Fastening Curse, well enough that it had given him pause. Well enough that it had also made him angry – Bella had been so upset to find that same spell on the boy's door on the night that her and Severus' relationship was discovered, and to have been faced with the same spell at such an ill time would have upset her even more. Severus, opening the door with a curt word and sharp wave, had gritted his teeth against his temper, and been very glad that she hadn't been the one to do it.

Then again, thinking of the ease of habit that Antares had employed to Fasten his door even while in the throes of another childish temper, Severus had become afraid, and it was the memory of that that had drawn Severus out of his bed and into the hallway this morning. Uneasy, he paced quietly in the small hallway, repeatedly exchanging the muted, rustling silence of Bella's sleep for Antares' now-unlocked door and the small sounds of a young boy's restless morning movements. Those sounds soon dwindled and became the sound of the shower being run in Antares' room, and somehow that slowed Severus' pacing to a crawl, and then a halting, shifting stop.

It wasn't so much that Antares had been able to do the curse so well that bothered him now, he realised, staring over at Antares' door. It was the fact that Quirrell – that the Dark Lord himself had deemed it wise to teach Antares that spell that made Severus' hands itch with

foreboding. Not to mention the fact that Antares would continue to use it, in spite of Bella's opinion of it.

Then again, as Severus had discovered, Antares believed that he had reason. "Leave me alone," was all the boy had said to Severus at first. But when Severus had refused to, the low, sullen tone had become angry and loud, with a note of betrayal –

"What do you want? You've won! You've got her, just leave me alone!" Antares' eyes were angry and hard, and yet somehow betrayed, as if he felt Bella should have chosen differently, should have rejected Severus – "LEAVE ME –"

It was with difficulty that Severus turned away from that memory, but soon his mind was clear again, if still filled with the question that was bothering him. His worry was nameless, unformed, but it was still there, as was the growing conviction that he had to find out exactly what spells Antares had been taught, if only that he could tell himself that there was no underlying reason for their order, no secret pattern to them.

Severus' tense shoulders sagged then, as if some decision had been made, though he knew that there had been none. It still felt solidly good to think hard for what Bella had done with the parchment she'd said that Quirrell had given Antares, and felt even better to plan to do a little snooping in Antares' room, just in case there was something the boy was holding back, whether by his own will, or by – or by another's.

It was then that the door before Severus opened, and Antares slipped through it and into the hall. Severus went still, feeling somehow caught in his scheming, but the boy did not even spare him a glance as he clattered noisily down the stairs. Severus entered the room warily, trying to stop thinking about the way the door was still the right size – not a little too shrunken or too large, as often happened with a sloppy Unfastening Curse. That was just an indication of the old theory that magic was easiest to channel while one was young and did not understand impossibilities. It was not an indication that the Dark Lord had somehow –

Severus barely stifled a yelp as he tripped over something and fell. He somehow managed to avoid braining himself on the foot of Antares' bed – his bed, once – and was soon glaring at the cause of it all. A cauldron. A bloody *cauldron*.

Serves you right for daydreaming when you should be searching, Severus thought irritably, picking himself up and scanning the messy room as he had not before. He returned his attention to the cauldron, which was now rolling gently in a circle on its side, its few contents scattered in close radius. Severus picked them up manually, one by one – only books and odds and ends, thank heavens. The unspoiled ingredients from yesterday's trip had probably been put away somewhere into Antares' bulging, battered trunk, which Severus eyed with disfavour. It looked like Antares had been living out of the trunk, and very messily too – robes sticking out everywhere, an inkpot perched haphazardly on the windowsill nearby...

Severus stopped, now truly still for the first time that morning. What on earth was he doing here? As he looked around him, all he could see were the normal trappings of any eleven – or, rather, twelve-year-old. Wandless magic and dubious curses or no, Antares was still normal. Angry, yes – but normal. Severus levitated the cauldron into place by Antares' overflowing trunk and sent the books and other things into it as soon as it had settled down, and when he left the room, he didn't look back.

Paranoia was beyond him. It had to be, for him to go on; if he feared a twelve-year-old, what would he not fear? Severus sighed, closing the door quietly. All the fear in the world would not stop the Dark Lord if he wished to return – if anything, it would draw him like a bloodhound to a hare, and by then Severus would be too worn out with fear to do anything when his loyalty was called into question again. Severus' lips thinned at that thought – at the thought that everything he'd gained so far could be lost for empty fear and emptier care. He squared his shoulders, heading downstairs with single-minded intensity, determined not to let it happen.

And then Severus saw the headline of the newspaper in Antares' shaking hands, and stopped short. "**BLACK IS BACK**", it said, in bold,

ugly-seeming letters, and Severus barely heard the boy's indignant protest as he snatched it from his hands, he was so busy reading.

And what a read, indeed.

BLACK IS BACK

And no, we don't mean Sirius Black, infamous betrayer of the Potters. Perhaps you will wish we did, for the Black in question is no other than his equally notorious cousin, Bellatrix Black, formerly Bellatrix Lestrangle. Ms. Black, thought missing for almost ten years, made a startling reappearance in Flourish and Blott's yesterday afternoon during the much-publicised release of Gilderoy Lockhart's Magical Me, the proceedings of which being thoroughly overshadowed by the drama that took place upon the reappearance of the haughty, terrifyingly gaunt Ms. Black.

And drama it was, indeed – upon entering the shop and rudely shoving her way through passers-by, Bellatrix Black gave a maniacal laugh, setting a bizarre threat-laden conversation with the confused and desperately bewildered Mr. Lucius Malfoy in motion.

Severus knew he was muttering to himself as he read, but he couldn't help it. The way the – it was just –

“She seemed unhinged,” said young Lawrence Hackerly, a clerk in the employ of the esteemed bookshop. “Really unhinged, I tell you; and for no reason at all.” Other onlookers corroborated this, many of them stating that Ms. Black did not hesitate to threaten Mr. Malfoy's son with wand and word, despite his carefully amiable responses to her mad fervour. The situation was somehow resolved by Mr. Malfoy's clever use of Bellatrix's scowling young son as a distraction, which persuaded the obviously imbalanced woman to let go of Draco,

Mr. Malfoy's son,
nearly sending him tumbling into a pile of dangerously sharp-edged
books in the process.

Furthermore, when said young son had an old possession of his –
dropped during the scuffle and
confusion instigated by his overbearing mother, no doubt – graciously
returned to him by
Mr. Malfoy, he disdained to use even the barest forms of appreciation,
leaving his mama to
answer with yet more threats. Several patrons remarked that her
influence on him
was as obvious as their shared resemblance, from the foul language
and surly behaviour
he displayed throughout the whole distressing event. All those at the
scene commended
Mr. Malfoy and his son, Draco, for their courteous and careful
handling of the situation and
were left wondering, in the words of Mrs. Honeywhistle, “what on
earth that
disgrace of a woman thought she was doing, disturbing the peace in
that manner.”
We at the Daily Prophet heartily agree.

Inside: The Bloodthirsty Blacks: A Family History not for the Faint of Heart
Speculation on the father of Bellatrix Black's Surly Son
A Call to Action: Angry Patrons of Flourish and Blott's Demand for Ban on the Blacks

“– done massaging that, I'd like it back.” Antares' sharp, mocking tone brought Severus back to himself. He looked down at the *Daily Prophet* again, and saw that his hands had curled into fists, and were crumpling the paper. “Look, Snape, I just want to –”

But Severus had also spotted a name, somewhere among the other useless stories on the front page. “Skeeter,” he breathed, tightening his grip further on the paper, “that – that brainless – insufferable –”

Bella's yawn chose to sound behind him at that point, making him freeze despite the feeling of Antares' mocking gaze. He couldn't let her read this, not after – no.

“...to have the paper back now, please,” Antares was saying clearly, slowly, as if to a dunce. Severus glared at him, snapping the pages of the paper in half almost without thinking.

“This is the old edition, you fool,” Severus snapped, relishing the surprise he glimpsed on the boy's face as he turned away from him and toward Bella's tired form. “How did you sleep, Bella?”

But she gave him a direct look, and started to skirt around him instead. “It's only a paper, Severus. Just give it...” Bella's voice trailed off into silence as she squinted at the back of the paper, on which Severus now saw the usual picture that went with the Sports section, and cursed himself for – “That was yesterday's game, Severus.”

“Bella,” Severus said anyway, knowing he might as well try, “there's an –”

“Let me see that,” Bella said abruptly, ignoring his protest. She tried to snatch it from him, and gave him a dark look when he withheld it. “Severus –”

“It's best you don't,” Severus said quietly, hoping she would listen. Yesterday had been taxing enough – why should she have to worry about the gossip of a third-rate bitch of an editor? “There is an article –” The newspaper wrenched itself from his hands and flew into Bella's, and she read the front page in silence, an occasional sneer stopping Severus' tongue from making the protests he knew he should be making. She was soon finished, and though she tossed the thing onto the table at which Antares was seated with a contemptuous shrug, Severus could see that her hands were shaking.

Her tone was steady, however, and tinged with a little of that contempt. “You've got a low opinion of my nerves, Severus.” When he tried to speak, Bella cut him off with a shake of her head and a cool smile. “It takes more than a bit of foolish gossip to upset me.”

Severus tried not to grind his teeth. “Gossip, Bella? That woman called you unhinged –”

“What’s for breakfast?” Bella said, as if she hadn’t heard him, the look in her eyes all but screaming that the topic of the ignominious article was closed. “I’m simply famished...” Severus turned away, before he forgot himself and said something. It was hard not to, while making toast to the accompaniment of Bella’s sneering laughter at the article about the Black family history as she pointed out what she said were glaring mistakes. Severus managed it, however, and soon was even able to sit and pick at his omelette as if he was more interested in eating it than in challenging Bella to let out the nervous anger he could see in the jerky movements of her knife and fork.

Antares beat him to it, dropping his cutlery with a clatter and shoving his chair back from the table. Bella’s eyes shot to him and seemed to freeze him momentarily, but not for long.

“I’m going to the garden,” he said defensively, rising out of his chair. “I’ll eat later –”

Bella’s lips thinned. “Sit down,” she said, her tone unmistakably commanding, and it came as no surprise to Severus that Antares obeyed, his eyes wide. Bella looked down at her half-eaten breakfast, as if unconcerned, but her voice was anything but. “You’ll eat now; I won’t have you whining about your hunger while we’re out.”

Antares flinched, and his chin went up. “Where are we going?”

Bella took a sip from her tea and set it down, hard. “Diagon Alley.” Severus closed his eyes involuntarily, willing himself to stay silent, but – “We forgot to do Quality Quidditch yesterday, in all the hubbub. I won’t have time tomorrow, so we’ll leave at ten –”

“Disguised, of course,” Severus said, through gritted teeth. He opened his eyes only to see Bella’s fill with something near to rage, but could not stop himself from speaking. “As you should have been yesterday, instead of –”

“Do you think I haven’t considered that?” Bella asked quietly, her fingers tightening dangerously about the mug in her hand. “Do you

think I didn't, then? I've been ear to the ground for news of that *bastard's* movements for two weeks, Severus. Out of those days, yesterday was the best time to go." She glared at him. "It was the *only* time to go. And I went."

"Then why go again today?"

Bella slapped her fork to the table, her face contorted in anger. "Are you deaf? We need to –"

"Listen to yourself, Bella," Severus hissed, uncaring of the way Antares was now staring at both of them. "You are about to risk your freedom – your peace of mind, for a trip to *Quality Quidditch*. For a broom even a dunce can order –"

Bella rose to her feet, alarming in her fury, but Severus forced himself to rise too, to face her down. He could lose her to this – he could feel it. "I will not sit still and listen to you insult me –"

"No, oh no! You'll go out and give Lucius a target. Two targets in two days – how smart, Bella. How cunning. And you expect me to sit here and watch you sacrifice you and your son to your pride?" Severus could barely see, he was so angry. But not angry enough to miss the way Bella had shrank a little before him – maybe it would work, maybe this would work. Maybe he could get through to her – "Don't be a fool, for Merlin's sake – let me go. Antares can tell me what he wants, and I'll get it –"

"And what will Lucius think?" Bella demanded, her tone loud, almost desperate. "You weren't there, Severus! You didn't see him looking at me – like I was some wretched thing crawling out of the darkness to stain his eyes, you didn't see *anything*! I won't do it – I will not crawl, I will not hide – I've been hiding for ten years –"

"And you've been safe for ten years," Severus hissed, "and Antares has been safe. Listen to yourself, for Merlin's sake! How can you tell me survival is worth more to you, then do this?" He forced himself to take a breath, forced himself to lower his voice. He knew he was shouting. He had to be reasonable, to make her pay attention – "Bella. Let me do this." She didn't move. "*Please.*"

She seemed to wilt at that. It was terrible to watch, but filled Severus with a deep sense of relief. He stepped forward and hesitantly drew her into his arms, and tried not to think too hard about how much he wanted to protect her and her son.

That thought made him look up. *Where is* – ah. The kitchen was empty, now, and if Severus listened hard around the silence he could hear a door swinging shut. That must be Antares –

“I’m sorry,” Bella whispered into Severus’ neck, and when she kissed him, he forgot Antares, but not for long. “Where are you going?”

“I need to speak to your son,” Severus said simply. Bella started, looking around in surprise, as if she’d expected him to be there, still watching them. “That broom – he’d better tell me which one he wants. He’ll be the one flying it, after all.” Bella hardly seemed to be listening, though; she was still obviously caught up in the fact that she’d not noticed the departure of her son. “Bella, please don’t worry about him. I’ll – I’ll do what I can.” She nodded at that, but her expression did not express much hope.

Severus sighed, hugged her one last time, and left anyway. It seemed to take only a minute to get up to that familiar door, which was – surprisingly – unlocked. Severus wasted no time in going through it, and did not pause in his stride until he stood in front of Antares, who was curled up over by the window, poking at something in his trunk. The lid slammed shut as Severus entered the room, though, and by the time he’d reached the boy he had uncurled and was sitting up straight, his expression hostile.

Severus took a quick look around the room – *yes, there it is, over on the bed* – and soon it was flapping noisily into his hands.

“Go away,” Antares said, flatly.

“Not until you’ve looked through,” Severus said, careful to keep his tone level. He tried to press the catalogue into Antares’ hands, but soon gave up when it was clear that the boy would only continue to shove it back into his own. “Look – oh, Merlin are you stubborn! It’s only a catalogue, for fuck’s sake –”

Antares seemed to finally, truly come to life at that. "And it's only my mother you're fucking," he spat, cutting Severus off. "You're always going on at me! How would you feel, if – if this –" The boy's words were halting, hesitant with anger, as if he could not even put his experience into words.

Severus tried not to sigh – this was how it had been last night. Sometimes he hoped Antares would eventually just say something, just sit down and list the myriad reasons he'd been tabling against Severus all this holiday. "If what?"

That seemed to do it, if not properly. "Sneering at me won't shut me up," Antares hissed, but his tone was still stumbling, still uncertain, and he still grasped for words to describe his opinion – "You're – you're *ugly*. Mum doesn't *do* ugly –"

Severus couldn't stop sneering, then, even if it was partly at himself. "Oh, but she'll do rich?"

Antares' hands clenched into fists at that. "We wouldn't take your gold if you begged!" he said shrilly. "If only I'd known – I wouldn't have said a word when she said she wouldn't trust you!"

"Really?" Severus said coldly. He didn't like to remember that moment, but his memory was as disobliging as always, pulling it smoothly to the forefront. "And then what? You'd have struggled at Hogwarts on your own – faced Quirrell on your own." Antares blanched at that – good. The boy was always so eager to forget *that* little episode in favour of Severus' many, as yet unspoken faults that it was sickening. "I suppose you would have done splendidly without my help –"

"Oh, fuck off," Antares muttered, now trying to edge away. "Wouldn't have had to –"

"Oh, really?" Severus gave him a hard smile. "For all we know, he had an eye on you from the start."

"That's what you'd say," Antares muttered, turning fully to his messy trunk again, tugging crossly at a robe that had a corner trapped in the

shut lid. But he'd gone a bit pale at that, and Severus couldn't help pursuing it, just to make a point.

"Unpleasant to think of, isn't it?" he said, almost conversationally. "I do wonder if the Dark Lord was in his mind then..."

Antares stiffened, fear flushing his face. Then he spun round, and the catalogue was in his hand in the next instant, its pages beginning to crumple under his grip. "Just go, all right? I'll look at your bloody catalogue when you do."

Severus' lips twitched in amusement. "Did anyone ever tell you how unwise it is to set a condition and fulfil your end of the bargain before the other person?" Antares glared at him then, but Severus turned away, and did so with a grim half-smile. It was almost uncanny sometimes, how alike the boy was to a younger, angrier version of himself.

The similarity ended with Antares' embarrassed, angry answer, irreverent as always. "Just fuck off, will you?"

Severus smiled mockingly. "In due course," he said sarcastically, but headed anyway for the door, trying not to chuckle at the way Antares tried to look angry at him and absorb himself in the Quality Quidditch catalogue at the same time. It became difficult to continue restraining his impulse to laugh when Antares turned the page and half-glared at some mystery broom upon it, but dog-eared the page anyway. Eventually, Severus shut the door, determined not to linger in the boy's room. He did need a shower before he went to Diagon Alley, after all.

Despite the shower, Severus felt dirty. It wasn't hard to see why – for some reason, the Leaky Cauldron was horribly dusty today, with a dust that coated Severus as he passed quickly through it, and almost made him sneeze.

He suppressed it, fighting the urge to carry himself off to somewhere Severus could sneeze and wipe hard at his nose in private, with no one to see his indignity. He only had one thing he needed to do,

anyway, and could go home after if he pleased. Potions supplies could always be gotten, and though a visit to Madame Malkin's for new robes was in order, those never varied, or took very long. And tomorrow was a Monday, on which parents would be too busy working to bring their snivelling kids into the shop to gape or snigger at him, so it would probably be ideal.

It rankled, though – Severus never liked putting things off, even when it was for an important cause. Which it was, Lucius and the papers and Bella's safety apart; Antares would be joining the Quidditch team this year, and getting him a robust broom could only add to his success, to Slytherin's success.

His thoughts now firmly engaged with thoughts of taunting Minerva over the next Leaving Feast and facing down the disappointed, humiliated looks on her prized students' faces, Severus reached idly into his robe pocket, thinking he might as well take a look at what model he would be haggling over today. No matter what Bella said, he knew that the shopkeepers of Quality Quidditch were never averse to being persuaded into lower prices, and since one of them was a former Slytherin himself –

Severus nearly stopped short, staring at the page whose number corresponded to the one Antares had sullenly given to him along with the catalogue. That couldn't be –

Well. It could. Severus only had to eye the price to see that this was probably what Antares was aiming for, regardless of sense and – of *something*. The broom wasn't ancient, and was in quite good repair, but wouldn't stand a chance against even the used Nimbus 2000s that he'd heard Professor Sprout crowing about the last time he'd been to Hogwarts for tea. It was unconscionable – what could Antares have been thinking?

By now, Severus had somehow roused himself from his stupor and goaded himself into walking down the street, the baffling catalogue page thankfully out of sight. At that thought, however, he slowed to a stop again, right in front of the stationery shop. He *knew* what Antares had been thinking – had been saying, in fact. The boy had watched silently, sharply, as Bella had given Severus the remaining coins from

their last, disastrous trip here, and neither of them had hinted a thing about Severus chipping in, which he'd been expecting, at least from Bella.

It hurt, somehow, and didn't at the same time, leaving Severus with a vague sense of outrage and a good bit of grudging admiration for Antares – he knew he'd certainly have hinted, if he'd been in the boy's place.

Still, there was a task to be done, and it wouldn't be done by staring at the somewhat too pretty display of the stationery shop before him. Severus turned briskly to the right and headed for the door to Quality Quidditch then, wracking his brains for what to do. Since neither Antares nor Bella had hinted, it must mean that neither of them was expecting anything. But then their silence could have been a ploy, and meant to start this itching in him to add where addition was not asked for, to give where donations were scorned. And yet he couldn't think of Antares spawning such an idea in his head, or even of Bella, who had looked proud and impatient when he left, as if ready to leave for the Alley in a moment if Severus showed signs of hesitating.

Sneering only occasionally, Severus made his way to the counter, and waited patiently to be served. But his nerves seemed on fire, and though knew it was stupid, he couldn't help thinking that there would be only one way to find out if his suppositions about Bella and her son were true –

“Severus? Is that you?”

Severus fought not to close his eyes, at that voice. If there was ever a person for breaking such a spell, it was Lucius Malfoy. It took a lot for Severus to turn, raise his eyebrows in affected surprise; it took even more to smile blandly, a little coldly (he couldn't help that, not when he could still see that lurid, awful headline in his mind's eye), at his sometime friend. In that moment, Severus thought he could believe Dumbledore an old fraud, and himself the true master. For if this chancy meeting was possible, what was the impossibility of his own mastery to that?

“Severus? You seem a little dazed,” Lucius said solicitously. Severus shrugged gracefully, turning his attention to the timid clerk that had

chosen this moment to appear. But he couldn't pretend to not hear Lucius, or ignore the uneasy swirl of feelings emanating from him when he spoke again. "Do you still take in the *Prophet*?"

Severus let himself freeze a little, then. It would be expected. "Yes. What of it?"

Lucius gave him a sharp, impatient look – one of those that Severus had never forgotten, would perhaps never forget. "Well, you must have gotten it this morning. Surely you read the front page...?"

"Ah, you mean the article on –"

"Yes," Lucius said, plainly, his eyes now filled with malice. "On Bellatrix Lestranger."

Severus gave him a carefully diffident look. "Or wasn't it Bellatrix Black?" Lucius shot a hard look at him and made to answer, but was cut off by the excited voice of the clerk, who had been eavesdropping shamelessly.

"Oh, aye, sir, it's Black now," he said, barely paying attention to the things he was shunting and shifting about on the counter. "Saw 'er last week, I did – horrible thin, like, and had this *air*..." The clerk shivered dramatically, and Severus was unduly pleased to see that it was not totally faked. "Asking after our used collection, and that. Told 'er we didn' 'ave one, of course – there's them as say you can control the owner if you 'ave his broom, and I thought –"

"Used brooms?" Lucius said, cutting in with a short laugh. "Likely all she can afford, I suppose."

"She tried to say that, oh yes," said the clerk, nodding smartly, "though there's talk of 'er brother's fortune, mouldering away under Gringotts because the traitorous scum's still walking live in Azkaban –"

"Who did she want the broom for?" Lucius said, interrupting again, and Severus was forced to keep silent, forced to hold back the impulse to somehow prevent the impending discovery of Antares' age – the only thing that Lucius could have held in any doubt, after

yesterday. It would be unwise, he knew – he wasn't even supposed to have knowledge of it, knew he needed to act surprised, instead of merely chagrined –

“Said it was for ‘er son, like,” the clerk said, sounding disbelieving. “If I ‘adn’t seen the papers this morning, I’d’ve sworn she was bulling me. But the manager said to give it to ‘er anyway. Didn’t want trouble, he said.”

Lucius seemed to have stopped listening. “Her son, eh?” The look on his face was contemplative in the way that led to danger. “What sort of catalogue, though? I saw the little brat – far too small to be riding a broom, I would have thought –”

“Oh no,” the clerk assured him, self-importantly, “she said he was eleven, goin’ on twelve. Glared at me and everything, when I doubted it, see –”

Lucius looked almost frozen in thought. “Draco told me there was a Black in his house, you know,” he said softly to Severus, whose mind was racing, now, and almost bursting with the thought that he’d forgotten something. “And I didn’t listen –”

“The boy claimed no relation to the Blacks, Lucius,” Severus said smoothly, careful to let some surprise strain his tone as well. He could see it now, in his mind’s eye – could almost see it in the careful, measuring look Lucius was giving him now. Even if Draco hadn’t told his father about Severus working closely with Antares, Lucius would eventually find out from someone – “It wasn’t Draco’s fault, and neither was it yours.” Severus wanted to bite his lip, but couldn’t – he had to reveal his part in Antares’ admittance to Hogwarts, or risk rousing Lucius’ suspicion. He shifted slightly, smoothing over the facts one more time in his mind, before speaking again. “Or mine.”

Lucius’ eyes snapped up to his, alert and questioning. “What do you mean?”

“I,” Severus said, in a disgusted tone of voice, “was the boy’s sponsor. For a scholarship.” Lucius seemed only able to stare at him now, so he went on. “She wore a glamour, of course – I see that now. And you wouldn’t have been able to spot an ounce of her true nature in it,

either, it was that good. She,” Severus said, making his voice pained, “...insisted. On having me sponsor her son, that is. Said she’d take only a Slytherin – I remember how much that amused the headmaster.” He clenched his hands into fists, then forced them open, slowly. “How she must have laughed.”

Lucius’ eyes were cold with fury, but his voice was calm. “I must be keeping you from your order – what were you here for, anyway?” Now a familiar mask was in place, and Lucius looked only civil as he inclined his head toward the rapt, listening clerk.

Severus only hesitated a moment. It was a risk, but he had to take it. “Brooms. For the Slytherin Quidditch team, of course.”

Lucius almost looked surprised. “Really? I thought the old ones were adequate.”

“Not for this year,” Severus said, letting some bitterness infuse his tone, shoving away the dread of having to talk Albus into paying for the cursed things, the dread of having to discuss this conversation with Albus at all, like old times – “It was really my fault, I suppose. Bellatrix – I thought her son might have been born in the air, with the way he flies.”

“Perhaps he was,” Lucius said, something strange now in his tone. To no surprise, he swiftly changed the subject. “Well, Severus, be honest – does Draco have any chance on the team, as things stand?”

Severus gave him a shrewd look. “In a year or two, perhaps. As much as I hate her and her brat son, talent is not to be wasted –”

“Oh, I’m not suggesting you let it go to waste,” Lucius said, smiling brilliantly. Severus turned from it – horrible things had come of that smile – “I’m not suggesting that at all.”

An hour later, Severus was cursing himself inwardly as he hurried into the Leaky Cauldron. He was forced to stop, then, to sit down with a drink he’d pretended he’d been going to drink, and forced after that to raise his beer tankard diffidently in Lucius’ direction as he wandered into the pub, ‘by chance’. Though he greeted Lucius cordially as the man sank gracefully into the seat opposite him, he

could hardly keep his mind on the conversation, so much so that Lucius began to tease him about his preoccupation with revenge.

Severus felt torn as he answered the teasing shortly, knowing that he was actually doing himself good by being in this mood, but at what price? Oh, he felt a fool, now, for mentioning Antares on the Quidditch team – but could he have said anything else? Draco would have known, would have babbled about it eventually, and then Lucius' cool, calm suspicion would inevitably have begun to sniff in Severus' direction. No, better this, though it was dire.

And dire it was indeed – direly amusing, direly threatening. For Lucius, after giving away that brilliant smile, had offered to fund the brooms of the Slytherin Quidditch team himself.

Severus' teeth gritted involuntarily at the thought, the memory of the moment. He'd been trapped, whether Lucius had known it or not; trapped as surely as he could have been. There had been no refusing the offer – what verifiable reason would he have given for doing so, when the whole thing was based on a lie? He'd forced himself, while talking of brooms for Slytherin, to not think about the consequences of such an action, to focus on the matter at hand, and now, look where that had got him.

Someone somewhere, Severus was sure, was laughing, hard, at him. The irony was that sweet – look, here, a man fool enough to wish to give out of the goodness or selfishness of his heart, and see how he is rewarded! With Nimbus 2001s and the dagger of a brilliant smile in his arm, and the knowledge that he'd handed Lucius Malfoy the tools to seek revenge on Bella.

“—od Merlin, Severus!” Lucius said, shaking his arm. “You are distracted as anything – come, leave off thinking of that mad whore. I'll deal with her, you'll see.”

Severus turned a disgruntled look on him with ease. “What plan?”
Please, please let his pride loosen his lips –

But it was not to be. Lucius shook his head, smiling, and asked instead, “What is he like, Severus? The boy, I mean.”

Severus sighed, and hoped to goodness that this wouldn't be another trap.

Even if it is, I've no choice, have I?

"Go on," Lucius was saying, now, his eyes sparkling with malice, "tell me everything."

Severus took a good long sip at his tankard, set it down, and began. He carefully wove a description of Antares as best as he could, wracking his brain as best as he could for the numerous complaints Draco and other students had made about him. 'Proud' had come up frequently, and so, unfortunately, had 'too bloody smart for his own good'. That was an unavoidable point, and though Severus hated making Antares seem anything but stupid and weak, there was the fact that he'd qualified for a scholarship, and had caught the eye of Flitwick and become his favourite despite the fact of his house. So all Severus could be content with was twisting the boy's character slightly out of shape, and painting him as one who would listen to no advice, proud beyond measure, his head swelled with his own self-importance.

Lucius drank it up willingly, and though Severus tried to peer into his thoughts, he could get nothing but a deep satisfaction and vague thoughts about some old book, which melded into the thought of Bella's hard expression then scattered as Lucius broke eye contact. "No cheating, Severus," Lucius said amiably, giving him a sly grin. "If you want revenge so badly, make your own plan."

"With Dumbledore breathing down my neck?" Severus gave a short, bitter laugh. "If only I had the luxury." Lucius sighed, a little mockingly.

"Then why are you still there, closeted up in Scotland?" he challenged. "Although I hear you've been moving around more often, of late...all those conventions. Are they amusing?"

Severus shrugged, trying not to think too hard of the real reason behind them, and when he spoke, his tone was noncommittal. "It's better than teaching."

Lucius gave him an almost amused look. "So stop. I could help you set up something," he said, his tone mockingly grand, his eyes alert. "What do you say, Severus?"

"What I always say," Severus murmured. He began to drink in earnest, now anxious to leave – Merlin only knew what Bella was thinking now, with him gone so long –

"Ah, of course," Lucius said, his eyes still sharp. "Doing your duty, still."

"As he would wish." It was out of his mouth before he could stop it, and once said, knocked the mocking expression off Lucius' face most satisfactorily.

Severus drained his tankard, allowing the relish of that accomplishment to sweep through him. That didn't make what he'd just said any different from what it was, of course.

A huge mistake. "As he would have wished, you mean," Lucius said, easily. His disdainful expression only spurred Severus on, only made him wonder if he dared, and what purpose it would –

Ah. Distraction – it was *perfect*, if highly unwise. Almost too good to be true, and so potentially rewarding to Severus if the Dark Lord ever...but he wasn't hoping for that.

Blinking away his real hope, Severus shook his head, very slightly. "As he would wish." Lucius froze for a moment, allowing Severus valuable time to rail at himself and wonder desperately what good could come of saying this, of hinting at this, and –

"You can't prove it," Lucius said, suddenly. His tone was controlled, but under it Severus could smell the fear, the caution, the disbelief. No smile lurked behind that expression now, and Severus more than knew that all thoughts of revenge must have flown out of the other man's mind –

Perfect. He forced himself to speak again. "I won't, not here," he said calmly, his heart beating like a wild thing at what he was saying, the words he was spreading, for Bella, for Antares – "but I can."

Lucius nodded, slowly, his eyes faraway in thought. *I have him, now.* “When, then?”

Severus tried not to wince – he didn’t want that, didn’t want to be anywhere near his old friend while prodding at the Mark, but...but. He’d started this, and there was no choice. “In two weeks time,” Severus said, shifting the empty tankard before him, inwardly calculating that the brooms would have shipped and reached the school by then, and with Lucius so distracted from the anticipation of the news (and perhaps even the telling of it, if the brooms came late), Severus would be able to strip them down for jinxes and charms, and other unsavoury additions Lucius might stoop to for spite. “Before then, I will be busy – term start, and all that.”

“I see,” Lucius said faintly, not looking like he saw at all, or was even listening. “Who have you told? Who informed –”

Severus stood slowly, checking his watch. “I did not need to be informed, Lucius. When I explain, you will understand.”

“But who have you told?” Lucius said, forcefully, standing up as well. “Surely –” he stopped himself, seeming to sense how impassioned his tone was becoming. A moment later, it was calm again. “Do you know where he is?”

“No,” Severus said simply, digging in his pockets for some change. A Sickel turned up, and he tossed it on the table. “Don’t worry yourself overmuch, Lucius. No one else knows...or, at least, that is what I believe.” He gave Lucius a quick, curt nod, fiercely pleased to see the chagrin in his eyes, if not on his face. “Good day.”

Lucius nodded back, saying nothing. As Severus strode for the Muggle exit, he caught a glimpse of his former friend’s face, hard and forcibly calm, and was alarmed to feel that fierce pleasure again. He banished it somehow, replacing it with self-recrimination and an urgent list of things he would now need to explain to the Headmaster; things he would rather not have thought about in the first place, but would now need to be argued and discussed in detail.

Turning the corner and into a shabby shoe shop, Severus sought out the back entrance and Apparated home, looking over his shoulder at

every turn. It was all he could do, really – standing there and trying not to shout at himself for cobbling all those lies together on the fly would not make a difference, or somehow mercifully relieve Lucius of all his memories of the conversation.

Bella was there to greet him, and that made it worse. She looked almost fragile, and the way she clasped at him did not help his perception of her, or ease the self-loathing that was building in the pit of his stomach.

“Where’s the broom?” she asked, almost cheerily. By now, Severus could hear Antares thundering down the stairs.

He ignored it. He had to. “Bella, we have a problem.”

Fifteen minutes later, Bella was half-yelling at him, her face white with fury. “You gave him a *description*? He asked you and you *gave it to him*?”

“What would you rather that I’d done?” Severus said back, as calmly as he could. He’d been holding desperately onto his calm for a while now, but could feel it failing now. “Anything else would have been suspicious, Bella –”

“And the brooms,” she said, with something that was half sigh and half snarl. “You just –”

“What would you have done?” Severus thundered, his calm well out of his grasp now. “Oh, I see – I should have told him I was shopping for your son’s broom in secret, so that *you didn’t have to*!”

“And what are you going to tell him, in two weeks time?” Bella said, eyes flashing angrily. “What will you tell him next time, Severus?” Her voice level had lowered, and was a whisper on the last word. “You didn’t even find out what he was –”

“If he does anything, it’s most likely to be to the brooms,” Severus said, trying not to shout again. “Which I’ll be able to take care of on my own. Which I can screen for evil spells while he’s worrying about the news I have for him.” Bella gave him a wide-eyed look, as if she knew what would come next. “That our Lord is alive.”

The rest of that day had melted together curiously, with all the conversations and feverish planning that Severus did by Bella's side melting into a morass of words. Antares had hovered in the background, silent, bringing them – well, bringing Bella drinks and eventually making dinner when it was clear that neither of the adults would remember to. Every so often, Severus had wondered what kind of strange tableau he made with Bella, hunched over the centre table and scribbling down details and suppositions at will, but then she would nudge him sharply and ask him another question, and all that went straight out of his head, driven out by plans and more plans.

The tense harmony Antares must have seen, of course, was not really anything close to that. Bella was not easy to plan with, for several reasons. The one most pressing was that she seemed to think Antares and Severus were all that she had, and consequently argued very hard against Severus meeting any of the other former Death Eaters to tell them the 'good news'. She'd been flatly against his tentative idea of hinting to Dumbledore about their relationship – enough that she'd talked him out of it entirely.

"You don't know Albus," Severus had said darkly, for what seemed like the third time. "For all we know, he's probably guessed already –"

"Then let him continue to guess," Bella had snapped, waving the quill she was holding in a jerky, angry pattern. "What would he do with the knowledge, anyway?"

"Trust us more," Severus had said, but even then he'd not quite believed it. He certainly didn't believe it now, curled up in the warmth of the bed he was sharing with Bella, listening to the sound of her breathing. Severus sighed – oh, Albus would twinkle at first, and then he'd turn right round and order someone to keep an eye on Severus, and question Severus too closely about his 'interference' in Antares and Bella's lives, and would eventually begin to really pry into the workings of their relationship. Which certainly wasn't what they needed now, what with the stress of Antares' obvious dislike of the whole thing.

But then, Severus had still felt a little like informing Dumbledore might be of some use – something Bella had cured him of with a hard look

and harder words. “If you think he trusts you at all, you are a fool,” she’d said, her words cutting a little too close to what Severus had always supposed. But then, she had gone on, her voice rising with every word: “If you tell him anything, I will deny it and cry slander –”

“Fine,” Severus had muttered, more from the hurt of that last statement than anything else. He’d merely wanted her opinion on the matter, really, not a further indication of how ill-matched they must look to everyone when the truth eventually came out. He’d looked around, restless with pique, and caught sight of a nasty little smile on Antares’ face, and that had just made it worse. “Look, we’ve been arguing about me for the last half hour – what about you?”

Severus still remembered the way Bella had started, looking almost guilty, and then announced that she would move out of Spinner’s End. The argument *that* had caused lasted through dinner, and ended in Severus somehow agreeing to her doing so, albeit in Antares’ third year, and under some very strict circumstances. Even now, lying next to her, he had to force away the numerous doubts that they would last till then, and hold fast to the excuse he’d given her for his offer.

“What matters is that you’re safe,” he’d said, at some point, his voice beginning to hurt with the thought of her being forced out onto the street simply because of their differences. “Even if this – our relationship, doesn’t work out. By third year you’ll have enough saved that you won’t have to live anywhere near Knockturn – you could easily get a muggle loan, get a house...”

And then Bella had agreed, but with words that shocked him. “We would be moving to Grimmauld Place, if we moved,” she’d said quietly. “Kreacher would be glad.” She hadn’t even given him time to demand who on earth she was talking about, then. Bella had simply moved on to the issue of what they would do if their plans went wrong, and then the issue of what might happen if their plans, or some of them, worked too well.

Severus turned over, restless. Nothing had been definitely agreed on, of course, but they’d gotten somewhere. And anyway, after they’d finally run out of things to discuss, Bella had kissed him and apologised for her comment about slander. He sighed now, picking

aimlessly at the hem of the pillowcase on the pillow beneath his head – that she could have seen how that had hurt and moved so directly to reassure him still felt wonderful. Severus basked in the feeling shamelessly, now – the meeting with Lucius had sharply accentuated the feeling of not being able to be with Bella as often as he liked, and that made him more conscious of how he felt around her, and more ready to savour it, to memorise each moment.

Severus sighed again. It was weakness, of course. But what weakness, and how sweet to have it here, beside him. Turning over, Severus shifted closer to Bella's warmth, and cautiously slipped an arm around her, determined to make this work. There was clearly starting to be more at stake than what he'd supposed, and though it was hard to face it, he did, burying his face in her familiar-smelling hair.

It was hard to face it, but somehow harder to even think of turning away. Somehow, Severus was perilously close to falling in love, and though experience warned him sharply against it, he could not help but tighten his grip around Bella and look his destruction in the face. Just now, it felt better than turning away, so he looked, and secretly knew he would go on looking. Bellatrix, after all, was not the sort of person from which you could look away.

A/N: Somehow, I never thought I'd see the end of this bloody chapter – it was a hard write, if enjoyable, but a hard write nonetheless. Feel free to take the poll I have down at my LJ about the new and improved summary, of course, and even freer to email or review and ask lots of yummy questions. Till the next chapter, guys...

Chapter 4: Crossing the Threshold

Many emotions had run through Antares over this long, confusing summer. Anger, betrayal, fear, disgust, happiness; it went on and on and on in an interminable flood of moments he could feel the confusion thick on his tongue like salt, numbing his reactions and causing him to do and say things that he knew might just add to the storm, but did and said anyway. Somehow, over the last few days, Antares had begun to try to think of the constants that had always been part of his life – well, constant, because there was only Bella. But thinking about what she meant to him had led him to realise an important fact.

Snape, and her (still quite disgusting) relationship with him, were not going to go away. The realisation hit him for the first time as he watched them bicker and plan after Snape's unlucky outing to Diagon Alley, at the moment when Snape told her sternly that what mattered was that she was safe, even if their relationship didn't work out. Antares' brain had shut down momentarily, trying to deal with the stress of hearing Snape say something so – so selfless, and seeing his mother half-smile at him because *she* clearly believed that it...wasn't an issue.

In the next moment, Bella had quietly revealed to Snape and, unknowingly, to Antares, that if she and Antares ever left Spinner's End, it would be to exchange it for Grimmauld Place, the only Black residence that no one cared about, and that Bella had access to. Antares had numbly tucked the news away for examination later, though. The realisation that Bella didn't think she would end things with Severus in the future was much more important, and more devastating than anything he'd ever heard.

Later that night, Antares had huddled quietly in his bed, turning the thought over and over in his mind. It forced him to see the connections, to look at his mother and realise that she wasn't the type of person to flit from person to person, lavishing attention on whomever she was with at the time. He'd sort of understood, even when he was much younger, that Bella wanted permanence, and would go after it in a way that not many people would. For one thing, she'd never even mentioned the idea that he might want to go to

someone else, want to be adopted by someone else. Not that she'd not thought of it – there had been times when they'd been in a bad situation, when her whole frame would almost vibrate with regret that she'd brought him along. But she'd still never asked, never offered a polite way to speak of him ever wanting to leave. It wasn't what she wanted, so she'd never asked.

Antares had drifted off to sleep with that on his mind, and woken with the further realisation that Bella would therefore never ask Snape to leave if she did not want him to. And that sealed things, really – despite the bitterness of it, Antares knew that he'd have to change his behaviour toward Snape. Not just because Bella liked him a lot more than Antares had ever supposed, but also because it was beginning to drain on him, maintaining a hard front all the time, and thinking and thinking of ways to make Snape's life worse when Antares' life was merrily digging itself into a hole all on its own, aided by the *Daily Prophet* and their ever more unbelievable hints and accusations against him and Bella. Added to the fact that the situation with Snape, for all purposes, was not going to go away, Antares couldn't wait to shed the anger, the bitterness over the whole thing.

Of course, that had been harder than he'd thought.

"Morning," Professor Snape muttered quietly as he entered the kitchen, the look on his face extremely grudging, as if simply greeting Antares was a hard thing to do. As he'd done for the last three days, Antares just nodded calmly and busied himself with poking sharply at the eggs he'd just started frying up for breakfast, so he wasn't provoked into saying something snide. It had worked so far, which was about all Antares could say in its favour. Knowing that Snape wasn't going to suddenly decide that Bella wasn't worth the trouble that Antares was causing him (ha) was worlds removed from actually trying to live with Snape and his numerous prickly edges. It was so hard that despite Antares' growing dread of Hogwarts and facing what people would say about Bella, going back there began to look far more desirable than putting up with those sharp black eyes skewering him at breakfast, or those strong, yellowy hands poking through his things from time to time.

But there were times when it was worth it. Yesterday had been one, with Antares being taught by Bella and Snape at the same time. They'd argued and argued and *argued* over the potential uses for a seemingly simple charm for checking what Snape had called the in-in-ingetrity of things, which Bella had rolled her eyes at and said that Antares would use it to check his food to see if it was safe for him to eat. Somehow, that had led to Snape saying that the charm was far more useful than Bella seemed to think it was, and that had led to the most entertaining argument Antares had seen in days. They'd called each other the most awful names, and their insults had implied very many things Antares still refused to think about, and Bella had called Snape an insolent whelp, and told him to keep his sneaky mind out of her thoughts, or else. They'd only stopped when Antares became unable to contain his laughter, and they'd still sniped at each other over dinner after that.

Of course, there were times when Antares couldn't help but wish Snape would just find a stream and conveniently fall into it. Snape had a far sharper memory than Bella, and always seemed to remember the promises Antares had made but not really meant to keep, such as the one about tidying his wardrobe, or rewriting that stupid essay for Transfiguration (so there'd been a few ink blots here and there. So *what?*), and Bella, too tired or too busy to argue, usually deferred to Snape's opinion on the matter. Which was how, despite Antares' pleas and grudgingly praising remarks about both their ability to find a curse on a glorified piece of wood (Snape had looked startled and highly annoyed at Antares quoting him there), he still hadn't been allowed to try out the new, maddeningly shiny Nimbus 2001 that had arrived not three days after Snape's meeting with Lucius Malfoy. The broom was currently in his trunk, torturing Antares with the thought of it lying fallow until he got to Hogwarts and could convince someone to let him fly on his own on the Quidditch pitch, something which he didn't think Bella would take kindly to him doing.

Though that was increasingly becoming a bit of a sore point, the way Bella still ordered him around. True, despite the fact that Bella had deceived Antares for almost a year, he still considered her his first really good bit of luck, and the parent he'd never thought he deserved. It didn't mean that he wasn't angry with her – far from the contrary.

He felt guilty about how many horrible things he wanted to say to her, yet wanted to say them anyway, and wanted to smack Snape on the nose even when he was doing something as noble and helpful as getting hold of Antares' broom for the year because he'd never have done it if Bella's safety had not been involved. In his worst moments, Antares resorted to thinking up and (unwisely) writing down snide things about how Bella and Snape's desire for each other seemed to grow with each added problem in Antares' life, but those were only the moments when he thought he would burst if he didn't say something to someone.

Antares sighed, guiltily. Of course, that 'someone' should never have been Blaise, even if Blaise was his friend. Antares now wondered if he should amend the definition of that word for both Blaise and Tracey, so that 'friend' meant something more like 'people who'll support you, with plenty of questions asked and many sideways looks', instead of something noble and sigh-worthy and irritatingly out of his reach. Just three days ago, he'd learned, to his chagrin and shaky relief, that even the accidental revelation of the alarming news of Bella and Snape's relationship would only prod forth more questions from his two friends, when he'd written one of those snide things about desire down in a letter to Blaise by mistake.

Antares resisted the urge to cross his fingers, but it was there. Blaise had written a garbled letter full of 'I told you so's at the beginning and full of confusion at the end – apparently, he'd actually taken the time to Floo Tracey to ask if anything referring to Bella and Snape was in *her* letter (which it thankfully wasn't), just to see if it was just Antares making a nasty joke. That was what Blaise had eventually decided, sounding rather cross about it all, and it still gave Antares the shivers to think of the kind of questioning that might follow his revelation of the identity of his mum's new conquest – if he ever actually said anything about it to his friends. It was, Antares thought, shifting from foot to foot, the kind of news you never wanted anyone to know. Ever.

As if he'd sensed the thought, Snape gave Antares a glare, pointing firmly at the table. "Must I ask you to sit down as well as eat? Surely –"

"I'm sitting, I'm sitting," Antares said sullenly, doing just that. Bella wasn't down yet, so he thought he was allowed to be sullen, and even a little rude, as he slapped his plate of finished omelettes down on the table and moved it away from the centre of the table when Snape gave him a pointed look. After that, Antares fell to standing about and 'accidentally' getting in Snape's way as they tried to get breakfast together, get the post in and get ready for the early train to Hogwarts in only two hours.

Soon enough, Antares was slapping said post down loudly on the table, making sure to hand Snape the *Daily Prophet* first – it wasn't worth getting snapped at for withholding that – before rifling carefully through the small pile of letters that was left, keeping an eye out for anything from Tracey.

Nothing again, and it made Antares give a little sigh of relief – maybe Blaise really *did* think the relationship thing was just a joke. If he didn't, he'd have told Tracey, and she would have written Antares by –

"Stop humming, for god's sake," Snape muttered, eyes already scanning the lurid headlines on the front page of the *Prophet*. "How many times do I have to tell you it's distracting?"

Antares gave up on the pile, pulling the plate with his half-eaten omelette towards him. "I thought you said you wished you could hear something other the useless drivel of –"

Snape actually lowered the paper at that, and glared at him over the top. Quite satisfying – "Quote me again, boy, and I'll –"

"But I was just –"

"What is it *now*?" came Bella's cross voice from over by the door, and Antares quickly suppressed the grin that was trying to fight its way onto his face. "Sometimes, I can actually hear you from the bedroom, you're that loud..." She clicked into the kitchen, looking a little less severe in the simple green robes she'd actually mended for the occasion, obviously wanting to look as smart as possible on platform nine and three quarters. It would be her official second sighting in the wizarding world since Diagon Alley, as she'd used Glamours at

Madame Malkin's for the last few days, half at her employer's polite request and half because Snape had said something about locking her in the house if she would not take even the simplest precautions.

Snape had balked at Bella wanting to be seen personally accompanying Antares onto the train, but he eventually agreed, however reluctantly, that it would be important for her to do so, so she could at least try to pretend that things were normal. Not that they were, with her wearing those attractive, slightly formal robes, but well – no one would know that. Antares cast an approving eye at them again, but his desire not to miss the coming attraction kept him silent.

True to form, Snape started a little, stared – probably because of the robes – then began to hastily fold up the newspaper. Bella spotted him right away and headed for the table, looking even more determined than usual. Ever since the *Prophet* had re-discovered Bella's existence and begun to peddle useless gossip about it, Snape had always been the first one to read the newspaper –

"Severus, not *again* –"

And, like now, always the one to insist that it wasn't good for Bella to keep on reading it. This time, his expression was as forbidding as ever, but he didn't bother hesitating to hand over the folded paper. The first time he'd tried that, Bella had taken it anyway, and after that, Snape had openly flouted the stupid rule of negotiation that he'd quoted at Antares when he'd cornered him into telling him what broom he'd wanted, giving up the newspaper yet arguing that she shouldn't read it.

"Will you at least hear me out?" Snape said, sounding peeved.

Bella didn't even give him a look. "Severus, you know we need to be informed on the press's opinion of what is happening in the wizarding world. Why you persist in this childish game is beyond me."

"I am as informed as I ever want to be," Snape said stubbornly. "You shouldn't have to read the ravings of that mad Skeeter individual every day –"

“– and yet it is important that I do so,” Bella said irritably, flipping through the paper impatiently as she drifted absently towards the sink. “For any of our plans to work –”

“– only one of us need be informed!” Antares, surprised at the vehemence in Snape’s tone, perked up. He remembered that marathon planning session quite well, thanks to all the horrid realisations that had been forced on him. But he didn’t remember them saying anything about being informed of –

Bella’s tone grew cold. “Are you suggesting that it be you?” she demanded. “Do you know me at all, Severus? When have I ever been one to stand aside and let others do my duty?”

“It is not duty to punish oneself by ingesting poison every morning,” Snape spat, surprising all of them. As Bella looked on, silent with shock, he paused for a moment, closing his eyes, before continuing in a slightly calmer tone: “Bella, I am only asking you to consider yourself –”

“And I say for the fifth time that I *am* considering myself in this, Severus,” Bella said firmly, shutting the newspaper and approaching the table. She sat down a moment later, setting the newspaper back in front of Snape as she did so. “I cannot be calm in public if I do not know what I have to fear.”

Snape sighed, and the tired look he gave Bella was familiarly soft, in a way that alarmed Antares, because he’d felt that weariness before, when trying to rebel against his mother on something she would absolutely not allow. “Will nothing I say –”

“Not in this, no,” Bella said, interrupting him with a look that was a bit too fond for Antares’ tastes. Snape scowled, but in a way that made him look only irritated, and he certainly didn’t refuse the way Bella squeezed his hand. It made Antares roll his eyes – thankfully, only for a minute. For, a moment later, Bella was giving Antares a fond smile and speaking again. “We’d better hurry,” she said, her smile now also encouraging as she reached out to pick absently at Antares’ messy hair, “since the train leaves at eleven – it’s almost ten two, now.”

Snape directed a cursory look at the tiny clock over the stove at that, and with his next words, Antares stiffened further. "Have you packed that broom?"

"Obviously," Antares said, though he knew very well that it wasn't. Snape obviously still remembered how hard he had argued, and, from the way he was looking at Antares now, suspected that Antares might have tried flying the thing in his room. Which he hadn't, though he'd thought long and hard about it, and which he hoped Snape would believe and leave him alone. Snape, disobliging as ever, just gave him a long, hard look and returned his attention to his own plate.

But not before beginning to ask Antares something that had been positively drummed into his head after agreeing to pack away the broom and not fly it. "I hope I don't have to remind you –"

"– to ask my friends if they've tried their brooms out," Antares finished irritably. "You've only said that a million times, for fuck's sake..." he trailed off as Bella gave him a tired look. "Mum, he *has* said it a –"

"It may be annoying," Bella said, ignoring Snape's angry mutter, "but it's still not incentive to swear."

Antares, a complaint on the tip of his tongue about this being the fifth time she'd ever complained about his swearing, suddenly got it. Suddenly understood. For a moment, the words swirled madly around in his head as he fit them into the right groups, and it was minutes before he finally felt able to say something sensible. "This is because of those articles," he said slowly, trying not to sound accusing. Bella was avoiding his eye – it had to be true – "Mum, that's so fucking stupid –"

"Antares!"

"No, mum, listen! You think it'll make a difference to anyone if I swear or don't swear, don't you? That's absolute crap!"

"Sometimes," Bella began, in a determined tone of voice, "you have to try anyway. I know it offends you –"

“If I was quiet and *good*, they’d say you’d brainwashed me into obedience,” Antares insisted, interrupting on purpose despite Bella’s warning look. “For fuck’s sake, if I was normal, they’d pretend I wasn’t – what do you think they’ll say the minute they find out I’m an Apprentice?”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake! Swearing like a street urchin may make you feel better, but it’s not going to win us any points –”

“There aren’t any points for us to *win*!”

Bella slammed her cutlery down in an uncharacteristic display of anger. “There are points to lose,” she snarled. “Everything they can say against you or against me *counts*, Antares – right now, it’s only a matter of time before they find some parent gullible enough to let their stupid child speak for them on matters he has no comprehension of. If that child has seen you swear, he will say it, and that harridan of an editor will go on to infer that you should be thrown out, and voila! The same stupid, conscientious fart of a parent suggests such a thing to the board of governors, and where are we?” Her voice was more than unsteady with anger now – it was furious – “I’m not going to let my past deprive you of a future, do you understand? And you are *not* going to do it to yourself. Is that clear?”

Antares bit his lip, stubbornness welling in him like a black cloud. Why couldn’t she –

“There’s no need for this, Bella,” Snape said suddenly, his voice startling them as it broke the tense silence that had sprung up after Bella’s angry speech. “To a degree, both of you are right,” he continued, pushing back his chair from the table with a slow movement. “There’s only so much one can do to clear one’s bad name in the press, in this country. But it must be done. I did it.”

“And where did it get you?” Bella asked, snidely. “Under Dumbledore’s thumb –”

Snape glowered at her. “Free to pursue my own business,” he snapped. “Respected, if also feared – if also suspected, sometimes. But I earn enough to keep myself in the manner I see fit, and the

Prophet has long tired of dredging up unmerited accusations against me. That's what you want, isn't it? No, in fact, it's what you need."

Bella was silent, but for only a moment. When she spoke, her tone was low, and oddly menacing. "What I need is Lucius to forget me and my son," she said quietly. "What I need is Antares' future to be secure. And with Lucius around –"

"Don't even start," Snape said, just as quietly. "You know just as well as I do that failure lies that way –"

Bella snorted, quietly. Her answer was almost inaudible, as if she said it only to herself. "Do I?"

Snape stilled, and the silence that grasped them all then was truly tense, in a way that Antares could nearly not remember –

Bella shook her head, and the tension abruptly decreased. "Antares, go get ready," she said, not even looking at him as he got unsteadily to his feet in obedience. She was staring at her mug even as he left, an undecipherable mix of emotions on her face.

Antares, climbing rapidly up the stairs, tried to ignore the worry that was now stalking him like an animal. There wasn't anything he could do if –

He didn't want to think about it, so he pushed the thought from his mind.

Not like I've got time to waste, Antares thought, suddenly spotting a pile of things in his wardrobe that rightly should have been in his trunk. *I've got to pack those, then put my robes on top, then...*

Leaving Snape's house was fairly silently done, when it came down to it. Tension hummed in the air around them as they did last-minute checks for the odd potion ingredient and quill, and Antares nearly forgot the new sweater Bella had gotten for him this summer in the silence.

“Just a minute!” he yelled, rifling frantically through the scanty pile of clothing in his wardrobe. It was a long minute before he finally remembered where it was – in his toilet, of all places, and still half-in and half-out of its brown paper wrapping – “I’ve got it!”

“Come down, then,” Bella called from below, her voice sounding calm. She didn’t look calm, Antares noted, nervously, as he stuffed the sweater into his open trunk under Snape’s disapproving eye. He just didn’t know if that was good or bad –

“Finally,” Snape muttered, as Antares closed his trunk. “Remember, Bella – I’ll Floo in tomorrow with news from Albus, if there’s any –”

“I remember,” she said coolly, as if it didn’t matter, as if Antares couldn’t see the way she bit her lip when Snape pressed an awkward kiss to her cheek then glared at Antares when he rolled his eyes. The man was gone in the next moment, his trunk disappearing silently with him, and then Antares had no more time to think irritably about why on earth relationships like that had to happen to *his* mum, because she was embracing him, and he had to steel himself for the coming Apparation, as it always –

Hurt.

When they arrived, Antares kept his eyes closed for a minute – the squeezing sensation, though something he was moderately used to, was sometimes enough to make him sick if he tried to look around immediately. Somehow, as Bella reluctantly let go of him, he found himself asking her about it.

“Oh, the squeeze?” she murmured, reaching down to tap his trunk with a careful lightening spell. “You’ll get used to it eventually.”

“But Mum, what happens if I’ve got to Apparate when I’m older, and –”

Bella cut him off with a sudden hug, one that was hard enough to stop his words in his throat. “It will be all right,” she said, a little shakily.

Antares did not answer, partly because he was not entirely sure she was talking about Apparation, and partly because his own voice might be shaky. Bella let go of him soon – a little too soon, he felt, but people were staring at them, and it was obviously time for him to get on the train. As he did so, he surreptitiously eyed the people who were looking – there were definitely a lot more than last year, which made him nervous. And they were whispering, some of them –

“Take care, darling,” Bella said quietly. Firmly. It helped Antares tug the trunk through the door nearest to him with ease, and even helped him to move on after a simple, cheery wave, though he didn’t feel cheery at all, and kept stopping to look out of the windows as he made his aimless way down the train, moving from compartment to compartment. Bella remained where she was until she spotted him trying to walk past another open door – she smiled then, and held her chin up a bit higher, watching him struggle through to the next compartment.

It made him feel a lot better, which he needed, just then. Because Adrian Pucey and Charles Warrington were in the next compartment, and the way they stared at him on his entry was not – not promising –

“Well,” Adrian said, after a long, strained moment of silence, “I don’t really see a resemblance.”

“Neither do I,” Charles muttered, still staring. Antares pushed his trunk into the bottom rung of the rack, trying not to feel them staring. It didn’t work.

“Do you know you don’t look particularly like a Black?” Adrian asked, a moment later, and it was so far from what Antares had begun to expect that he nearly jumped. “Well – there’s a bit about your eyes and your face shape, but –”

“No, he definitely doesn’t,” Charles said, nodding in agreement. “Else, I’d have known – didn’t read all those awful genealogies for nothing.”

Adrian shot Charles a familiar glare. “I would have known too, Charles –”

“No you wouldn’t –”

Antares didn't bother to wait for them to argue it out. "So you lot aren't going to stone me, then?" At his weak approximation of a joking tone, they both seemed to realise he was still there.

"Well, no," Adrian said slowly, as if he was stupid. "Be hypocritical, wouldn't it?"

Antares nodded smartly, as if he knew what that meant. Which he didn't, really, but it didn't sound –

"Well don't just stand there mooning, sit down," Charles said irritably, stretching exaggeratedly. "And please, please tell me you have a broom –"

Antares finally relaxed. They wouldn't bother asking him that if they wanted to – if they thought – well. He supposed he should answer – "I've got one, don't worry." He couldn't help smiling a little at the thought of the Nimbus, then, no matter how guilty it made him feel.

Adrian seemed to notice, because he sat up a little straighter and leaned in. "Don't – you didn't get –"

"A Nimbus 2001?" Antares said smugly. "*Maybe...*"

Adrian grinned. "When mine came in, I thought I would *die...*" And the conversation was much easier after that. Charles actually strode over to his trunk and retrieved his own new broom, handling it like it was some precious thing as he talked excitedly about how the owls had nearly given his mother a fit, crashing through the kitchen window. Antares didn't quite believe him, of course, but it was all right – relief was coursing through him in strange, surprising bursts every now and then, because he'd thought a lot about how horrible the train ride to Hogwarts would have been if Adrian and Charles had –

"Hey, what's that?" Adrian said, breaking Antares' train of thought. "What the bloody –"

Charles looked around at the compartment incredulously, as if its shaking interior could actually explain why the slow grind of the Express was becoming slower, and not speeding up. "The train is actually stopping again," he said uselessly, scrambling to his feet,

broom still in hand as he pressed toward one of the windows that looked out onto the suddenly quite stationary platform outside. "I think someone's getting on, too."

"Who is it?" Adrian asked just as uselessly, as he too was already scrambling to his feet to get to the window. Antares shifted round in his seat, too happy to care either way about seeing or not seeing the mysterious person – whoever they were, they could bugger on or off the train if they liked. He was – "Good god, it's a Weasley!"

Antares abruptly forgot his indifference. "What?" He surged to his feet as well, twisting round and shoving at Charles' bullish shoulder, which was in his way. "I can't see –"

"It's a *girl* Weasley," Charles said, ignoring him, his tone particularly scathing. "Merlin in a pond, we'll have to work with a Weasley –"

Antares groaned, unable to block out the thought of how uncomfortable it would be, working with someone like Ron all day tomorrow. "I thought all the Weasleys were at Hogwarts!"

"No, there was one left," Charles said, pulling back from the window with a scowl on his dark face. "My mum was saying something about it the other day, I think – didn't think it would be another Apprentice, though –"

"It? Why, what did she say?"

"She better not come to our carriage," Adrian said sullenly, slamming the window shut, his face also sporting a scowl. "Their whole family's cracked, especially the twins –"

"But you know Snape'll think of it," Charles complained, sinking back down into a seat opposite Antares, his broom now tucked back in his trunk. "He'll want all of us in the same place, I just know it –"

"Sometimes I wonder what he thinks we could do to the bloody train if we were divided," Adrian said darkly. "*Then* I remember he was probably born suspecting his brothers and sisters of stealing his food –"

The door opened, putting a swift end to Adrian's snide comment, and putting a damper on all three of the boys. For Snape was present now and, from the murderous scowl on his face, might actually have heard some of what they were saying.

Then Snape turned the force of that scowl on Antares, and he abruptly remembered the supposed charade the man was supposed to put on – the one of disliking Antares. It certainly didn't feel like a charade, though – Snape's eyes fairly spat anger as he stepped aside, nudging forwards a nervous-looking girl sharply as he did so.

"Weasley, you will remain in this carriage," he said imperiously, not even looking down at the girl, whose face looked awfully familiar for someone he'd never even heard of. "These are your fellow Apprentices – acquaint yourself with them." Snape turned away then, ignoring the look of surprise on the girl's face, but not before he had stared Antares' legs into what felt like shaky jelly. The snap of the door only seemed to add to the tense silence among them all, and when Adrian broke it, his tone fairly screamed that the Weasley girl was unwelcome.

"Put your trunk in the rack and sit down," he said coldly. "The train'll be moving again in a minute, like it should have been."

But his accusatory tone seemed to have little to no effect on the girl, who was now giving Antares a look that was bizarrely relieved. "I know you," she said determinedly, fiddling with her trunk handle. "You were in the bookshop."

For she, as Antares had realised, was indeed the girl from Flourish and Blott's that he'd bumped into twice. He saw her familiarly bright, red hair now and cursed himself for not realising then that she might be a Weasley – not that he'd cared to think about them at that point, with the threat of Lucius Malfoy's appearance hanging over his head. Antares hadn't even shrugged in reply before Charles had taken up the assault, his chin high with condescension, the expression on his face resentful.

"Bad news, Weasley – he's in Slytherin, like us," he said gloatingly. "Of course you'll be in Gryffindor – best not touch him, he might make *you* Slytherin."

Adrian grinned. "And the weasels at home would just hate that, wouldn't they, Weasley?"

"We're not weasels," she said, gritting her teeth, an incredulous expression on her face. "And he's not in Slytherin, he helped me –"

Adrian shook his head at Antares, then, a mean smile on his face. "Oh, don't worry, he's a special case," he said, as if Antares was some sort of slightly mad brother in his family. "We certainly won't help you, don't worry."

"Well I don't *want* your help," Weasley said crossly, though it was obvious by the way that she tugged at the trunk that she probably did. She got the door open behind her by sheer luck, and was out of the compartment before Antares could think of anything that wouldn't further label him as a 'special case'.

Five minutes later, he gave up the ghost. There was no way to say it but in the manner of, as his friends had oh-so-kindly put it, a *special* case. "You know, as much as I don't like Weasleys –"

"Oh please tell me you're not defending her," Adrian begged, his tone more mocking than contrite. In the next moment, it had sharpened, as Adrian shed all pretence of pleading with Antares. "Antares, she's a *Weasley*. Even their hair is Gryffindor!"

"And speaking of the hair, how could you not notice she was a Weasley when you met her?" Charles asked suspiciously. "And again, please tell me you're not defending her –"

"I haven't even *said* anything yet!" Antares spluttered, a little confused by the double attack.

"And we're not going to let you," Adrian said smartly, giving him a wink. "Helping Weasleys, Christ – wonder what the fuck the world's coming to –"

"Adrian, all I did was point out that she was buying a bad copy of a book," Antares said slowly, struggling to remain patient. "I do that to everyone, for goodness' sake. You're acting like I gave her gold or

kissed her arse, or sold her maps to the dungeons – which I'll obviously see no reason to do, if she's not in Slytherin –"

Adrian's eyes widened incredulously. "*If she's not in* – this is ridiculous," he muttered. Antares watched him in disbelief as he got up from his seat, but swatted away Adrian's hand when he tried to touch Antares' head. "Hold still, won't you? I'm just –"

"Get off!"

"Why? I'm checking you for fever –"

"Leave him alone, Adrian," Charles said, his voice irritatingly amused. "He's not going to understand if we don't explain –"

"What's there to explain?" Antares snapped, itching to give Adrian a kick as he rolled his eyes and stumbled back into his own seat. "So the Weasleys are usually Gryffindors – I get it, there's no need to –"

"Adrian was just being an arse," Charles said, shrugging. Antares could almost not keep himself from rolling his eyes as Adrian narrowed his eyes predictably at that statement, and started to say –

"I was only –"

"I've had enough of this," Antares muttered to himself. Suddenly, he was on his feet, his body ringing with restless tension, and his mind humming with uneasy thoughts. That diverted the older boys from their lazy bickering. "I'm taking a walk," Antares added needlessly, just to see what they'd say. He could just bet –

"And if you run into Weasley?" Adrian asked, carelessly.

Antares tried not to bristle. "I'll kill her and bring her body back," he found himself saying, just as carelessly, hard pressed to keep the sarcasm from his tone. "Trophy for Slytherin, right?"

Charles laughed, but still sounded a little uneasy as he spoke. "Whatever you like, mate."

“Do you really think I could kill someone?” Antares asked incredulously, heading for the door, not really expecting an answer. When one came, it stopped him in his tracks.

“Well –”

Antares turned, and saw Adrian give him an uneasy grin. It made him blink in astonishment – surely they didn’t – no. They’d been friendly to him. “You’ve got to be joking, Adrian – I’m *twelve*, for god’s sake.”

“Antares,” Charles began, “it’s not that –”

“The only thing my mum’s ever taught me is how to cook,” Antares said angrily, not caring if that wasn’t quite the whole truth. But honestly, the most lethal thing he knew was a spell for boiling potatoes without water that Bella had told him to be careful with, since she’d adapted it from a much less mundane spell she’d refused to tell him the name of. And maybe those two spells from Quirrell – from the – anyway, the spells that she’d forbidden him to use. Antares scowled, remembering how that lesson had ended, and how the day had ended after that. The sight of Adrian and Charles lost for words at what he’d said only served to irritate him more. “And be logical, for Merlin’s sake – how in blue hell does the *Prophet* know anything about us in the first place, if none of them has ever spoken to us?” With that, Antares left the compartment, slamming the door behind him as he went. It was all just too ridiculous for words, and if he’d stayed in there a moment longer –

“Go away!” the girl half-shouted at him, as he opened the door to the next compartment and walked in. Then she noticed him, and started to say something, then glared, probably having remembered that he was in Slytherin, after all.

“Oh,” she said then, grumpily, “it’s you.”

Antares just stepped in and shut the door, ignoring the way Weasley watched him as he shuffled his irritable way towards the other end of the compartment.

“Got tired of your friends already?” Weasley said snidely, hitting the nail painfully well on the head. Antares stopped, turning to glare at her, and shot off the first excuse he could think of.

“No, I’m going to the loo,” he said, just as snidely. When her gaze remained steady with disbelief, he couldn’t stop himself from saying, “What are you looking at, Weasley?”

Weasley tossed her hair and sniffed, reminding him a little of Tracey. “The loo’s the other way,” she said pointedly, taking up a book she’d tossed to the side at some point, but merely ruffling its pages.

Well, that was stupid. Antares unsuccessfully fought the urge to blush, and tried to think of something else to say. Weasley beat him to it, still fiddling with her book. “My name’s Ginny, not ‘Weasley’.”

Antares snorted. “Why should I care?”

Weasley – well, *Ginny* fidgeted, and started to look a little pink. “You helped me in that shop, you know.”

Antares stared at her. “And your point is...?”

“You shouldn’t be in Slytherin with them,” she said, determinedly. “You’re not like them.”

“You don’t know anything,” Antares said, rolling his eyes, a little relieved that he could say something sensible and cutting without looking like a fool again. “I’m a Black – we’re *all* in Slytherin...” Watching her stiffen at those words was like a sudden slap to the face. What was *wrong* with him, making such stupid mistakes just now? He’d almost forgotten the old impulse to snap back, to shove the one thing he knew about himself in other people’s faces, because this summer, it’d been the last thing on his mind –

“You’re her son, then,” Ginny said quietly, eyes narrowed at him. “The son of that –”

“You be bloody careful what you say next,” Antares said coldly. “That’s my mum everyone’s running their mouths off about –”

“How can you say that? She was a Death Eater, my mum told me –”

“Oh, *your* mum?” Antares said tightly, the image of Bella’s tired, determined face goading him to scour his memory for anything that might hurt. He didn’t know much about the Weasleys’ parents – had never really cared – so in the end he just made it up. “I hear she’s too fat to fit on the Express.”

The scrunched, furious look of Ginny’s face told him he’d somehow struck gold. “Don’t you *dare* –”

“Oh, so you’re allowed to insult my mum, and I’m not allowed to say anything back?”

“Doesn’t count if she’s a Death Eater,” Ginny shot back. “It’s true; you can’t say it isn’t –”

Antares shrugged, a nasty smile coming to his face. “I could say the same thing about your mum,” he said quietly. “Not very logical, are you?”

“Oh, you –”

“And then you’ve got the cheek to tell me I shouldn’t be in Slytherin, just because you say so,” Antares went on, relishing the fury on the girl’s face. He started for the compartment door he’d come in at, feeling full and fierce with triumph. “Don’t worry, I’m not contagious,” he sneered, when Ginny pulled her legs away from his as he passed. “And anyway, the Hat wouldn’t make you Slytherin if you begged – you’d stick out like a sore thumb.”

Ginny bristled at that, flinging her stupid book to one side. “I wouldn’t want to be in Slytherin in the first place! You’re the most horrid –”

But Antares had just realised the best way to finish this off, and he certainly wasn’t going to wait for her blather to put the finishing seal on this daft conversation. “Think, Weasley,” he said, cutting through her slightly shrill tone, “you insulted me first, if you remember. Maybe you were right – maybe I really shouldn’t be in Slytherin. Not that I’d be very useful there with you around – you’d just go on insulting everyone in sight, like the good little Slytherin you really are.” He had

the door open in the short moment of shocked silence, which erupted into shouts of how he was the rudest, most horrible person she'd ever met. He smiled politely at her on his way out, closing the door behind him with a snort of laughter at just how angry she was.

Somehow, the fact that Antares really did need the loo now only made it funnier. He took his time, muddled thoughts about Blaise and Tracey running through his head towards the end. From their letters, he didn't think they'd even thought for more than a few moments that the stuff the *Prophet* had been saying about him was true, though he supposed he'd probably have to knock down their notions of Bella's life, present and past. Though they'd not really said anything outright yet, either of them – mostly, his friends had just expressed worry and sympathy for how Bella must be feeling, which was fine.

Antares sighed, watching the toilet flush itself before buttoning up his trousers and washing his hands. Waiting would be the hardest part of that, really, though weathering the storm of questions that was sure to come from Blaise's quarter, if not from Tracey's, came a close second.

"Where've you been?" Adrian asked, as soon as Antares entered the compartment. "Did you actually go talk to her?"

Antares sat down with a thump, suddenly nervous. He couldn't wait like this, not with Charles looking like he wanted to kick Adrian for saying anything, not with that look of concern on either of their faces. Antares leant forward, then, having made his decision. He didn't owe Adrian or Charles anything, but if there was some way he could get them to let go of the stupid notion that he was some kind of child maniac, he was ready to do it.

"Why don't we just talk about the fact that you think I'm some sort of miniature Dark Lord, or something?" Antares said sharply. "Much more important than telling you I went to the loo, I should think."

"We don't think –"

"You could've said that before I left, and you didn't," Antares quickly pointed out. "Adrian, you *know* me, you and Charles – how could you even start to think –"

“We don’t think that –”

“Let it go, Charles,” Adrian said, interrupting his friend. “Antares, it’s really...we’re just being careful, all right? You never showed us how you stole all that stuff, and we got to thinking...” His voice trailed off when he spotted the look of consternation on Antares’ face. “You’d have thought the same thing, and you know it,” he finally said, a little uselessly.

By now, Antares didn’t care. There was nothing he could do about this, obviously, since there was no way in hell he was showing anyone how his natural – or, as they would probably say, *unnatural* facility with Charms helped him steal. He got up instead, heading for his trunk with the sound of Charles’ cautious words rolling over him as he did so.

“That’s not the only thing, Antares – you know that. You’re good with magic, better than most of the people in your year. The teachers, you don’t know how they used to talk about you, like you were some prodigal genius or something. Everyone’s going to think of that, not just us – it’s fine on its own, but with the fact that you’re really a Black –”

“You know what, Charles?” Antares said, opening his trunk with a sharp tug after tapping it open. “Stuff it. Nothing I say’s going to make a difference.”

“That’s not –”

“Believe what you like,” Antares said, interrupting heedlessly. He fished out the first book to come to hand, the *Standard Book of Spells* for this year, and closed the trunk again. “How ‘bout this – I’m the love child of the Headmaster and a fig tree, and Bella stole me in revenge for the Headmaster seducing one of her own fig trees away from her. Now she’s training me as a figgy weapon so she can conquer Hogwarts and cover it in – you might have guessed it – *fig trees*.” Antares suppressed his slight relief at the fact that Adrian choked and sort of grinned at that description, however – he couldn’t spend all his time trying to convince everyone that he wasn’t going to do anything horrible to them, could he? Not even his friends.

Charles didn't let the matter rest, though. "You can laugh at us all you like, Antares," he said crossly. "We're not the only ones wondering – and you can bet a lot more people won't be as nice about it."

"I'll just tell them to go fig themselves, then," Antares said, sitting down and beginning to search for the part that had talked about the harder Dancing Charms. "Now, where was that page...?"

Charles tone was irritated enough that Antares didn't need to see his face to know that he'd be scowling. "I'm just trying to help, you know."

"Sorry, but my fig mission must be done alone," Antares said, forcing his voice to sound far deeper than usual. It didn't quite work, and it made Adrian grin and shake his head at him. "Really, I hear you – I just don't think I'll bother to care about it, that's all..." Antares trailed off into a curse as something fell out from between the pages. For a moment, he almost Summoned it back to himself before belatedly realising that that would definitely be a bad idea around his already slightly paranoid friends. Swearing again, he scrambled out of his seat to retrieve it, and scowled when he stubbed his toe, hard, while trying to sit down.

Unsurprisingly, Adrian was curious. "What's that?" Charles gave Antares a curious look as well, over the top of what looked like the new edition of *Wonder of the Wigtown Wanderers*.

Antares shrugged, wondering absently if he'd be able to get Charles to borrow it to him. "Some stupid –" he peered at little book in his hand for a second – "– some stupid diary they left inside the textbook," he said dismissively, stuffing the thing into one of his pockets. Adrian shrugged, obviously uninterested, and Antares turned his attention back to his textbook.

About half an hour into a different, larger section on the theory of self-effecting charms, Antares began to pat himself for the diary, having already borrowed a Self-Inking quill off a slightly grumpy-looking Charles so he could make a note to himself to ask Professor Flitwick about the ridiculously complicated-sounding description of one of the charms referenced in the book. The diary turned up obligingly a minute or so later, and Antares tugged it out and flipped it open, thinking to tear one of its small sheets out for the note.

Antares examined the page, then, and quickly changed his mind. The year embossed up in the corners of the blank, slightly filmy pages was hard to make out, but not that hard – was that really 1943, on there? If the diary was that old – and, when Antares gave the cover a look, it *did* look that old – both the magical and normal bindings would probably be weak, and tearing out one page would do for all the rest of them, leaving Antares with an irritating flood of dated, too-thin paper he didn't want to use right now.

"You should probably just throw that old thing away," Charles said, giving the shabby little book a disdainful look over the tope of *Wonder*. "Looks like someone Banished it to a bin and forgot it."

"Whatever – I just need to write something down," Antares said, now flipping through its blank pages with mild interest. "It's empty, at any rate." He shook the quill reflexively, then decided on a page – January the 15th, which was as good as any day. A few drops of ink landed on the blank page and...sank into it, leaving the page as blank as it had been before. Antares stared, and tried squiggling on to the page again, but that, too, just glistened for a moment and disappeared into the book. "Fucking hell," Antares muttered. What kind of –

"What is it now?"

Antares looked up at Adrian, opened his mouth, then shook his head. Instead of trying to explain, he got up and sat down by him and, ignoring his sceptical expression, squiggled hard all over the page. Adrian's mouth fell open as he watched the ink disappear into the page in the order Antares had scribbled it on. "What the – that is so cool –"

"I know," Antares said, now engaged in finishing off a badly done tree. It took a little longer to vanish, especially after he'd written 'FIG TREE' smack in the middle of the uselessly large trunk. A moment later, the words reappeared, but with a question mark beside them. "Maybe it's one of those automatic diaries – the kind that records when you've brushed your teeth, and you have to use something key it to –"

“Let me have a go,” Adrian said, wrestling the quill from Antares’ hand. In a minute, a strange little map was shaping up on the page, complete with a wonky street or two and a little insignia that looked like a house. It stayed as he wrote, as if the diary itself was interested in his quick, thin lines, and it took a long time to fade once he’d written the words ‘Fig Tree Road’ on the street nearest to the house, and drawn a too-big arrow between the two. Then the ink sank in rapidly, and though Adrian and Antares waited and waited, nothing else happened.

Then Adrian began to shake the diary roughly – that pulled Antares right out of his little patient daze. “What are you doing?” Antares said, trying to snatch the diary from him. Couldn’t he see that it was old, for crying out loud? One really rough shake and the diary could fall apart –

“It’s supposed to answer back,” Adrian said, evading his grabs for the diary as he hunched over it and began to draw into it again. “That’s what –”

“Oh come on, Adrian, let me –”

Adrian snorted impatiently, still doodling crazily into the diary. “Hold your horses, will you? This is an experi – oh Charles, you bleeding spoilsport! Give it!”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Charles said irritably, thrusting the slightly more banged-up diary into Antares’ hands with a hard look over his shoulder at Adrian. “It’s just an old diary – its reply function probably stopped working a while ago.”

“Makes sense,” Antares grumbled, accepting the small book back. “Think it was made in 1943 – look on the cover, Charles –”

“See, Adrian, even the manufacturer’s address is wrong,” Charles said, peering closely at the small inscription on the diary’s front. “Vau – V-something road, at any rate. Never heard of it in my life.”

“Maybe it’s one of those joke diaries that stopped working,” Adrian suggested, his irritation at not being able to explore the diary quickly

giving way to his speculation. "Mum used to go on and on about how they were all the rage in her year..."

"Yeah, well it's useless, now," Antares said with a shrug, closing the diary and crossing over to his trunk to tuck it away. "I certainly don't need diary paper, anyway."

Somehow, the small excitement over the diary made Antares relax even more as he begged a bit of parchment off of Charles. It felt like things were normal between all of them – just a little, in a way that reduced the fear of more people being like Ginny Weasley, hating him on sight just because of his name. Writing the note he'd originally wanted to write took a lot longer than Antares thought, partly because he couldn't find the referred charm at first and partly because he almost couldn't understand the explanation for self-effecting spells. Just phrasing the question was hard.

It was that task Antares was engrossed in throughout Snape's hostile visit to their compartment, and that task that gave him the restraint required to keep his face straight when Snape described the new Apprentice as being 'unsettled', and effectively warn them all that there should be no hanky-panky on the train. Charles had been unable to stifle a laugh for long, and by the time the usual voice had announced that Hogwarts was close, he wasn't laughing as much, but still caught up making dirty, dirty plans with Adrian. Antares simply shrugged and ignored it, now putting finishing touches on the small essay he'd ended up writing about the confusing theory not because he didn't find it funny (which he did *not*), but because he wasn't quite sure he wanted to let his mind wander down the track of doing dirty things to Weasley. He could only shudder as he imagined what his friends might say if they turned up the image in his – oh fuck, now he was thinking about it –

Antares finally gave up on the note at that point, shoving it into one of his pockets and settling back in his seat with the book propped in his hands to deflect suspicion while he went through the opening part of one of the Occlumency exercises that he'd always been able to do well. He hadn't trained much toward the end of the summer, and couldn't imagine what would happen if Blaise or, more likely, Tracey was able to get round his slightly weakened defences and reach for

the thought of seeing Bella and Snape...*together*. Or worse, reaching for the thought of Weasley and someone –

Back to that exercise, now.

The rest of the journey dwindled away into nothing faster than Antares would have thought, and in no time, he was rising to his feet and struggling into his school robes while Adrian and Charles gossiped about all sorts of things, ranging from some girl in their year whose mum had transferred her to Beauxbatons for some reason to some bickering about the final score of a contentious match between the Montrose Magpies and Pride of Portree, which the Magpies had narrowly lost.

When it was time to get off the train, Antares stepped off with his friends, still barely listening to their conversation. Professor Sinistra, who he didn't think he'd spotted on the platform, was just getting off, looking dreadfully tired and curiously well-dressed for just a train journey. Then Professor Snape emerged from behind her, and Antares looked the other way, rather than catch the man's eye when such a disgruntled expression was on his face. Antares had found by costly trial and error that Snape was the sort of person that noticed almost immediately when you were looking at them, and –

"Can you please watch where you're going?" Antares looked up, and stifled the urge to roll his eyes. *Why* was he always bumping into Weasley, for god's sake? Adrian and Charles were glaring at her now, as if she'd somehow stabbed Antares with those words, and Antares noticed her face was red from exertion, and looked reflexively behind her to – ah. She'd tugged her trunk off the train, not knowing that the school house elves were supposed to sort them out for them.

And Adrian, it seemed, was about to remind her. "God you're an idiot, Weasley," he said, his tone disgusted. "I suppose you don't know anything about house elves?"

"The weasels at home can't afford any, Adrian," Charles said, grinning nastily, "Of *course* she wouldn't –"

“Just leave it there, all right?” Antares found himself saying, despite the annoyed looks on his friends’ faces. “The house elves get it for you –”

But Ginny obviously wasn’t ready to believe him. “You can stuff your advice,” she hissed angrily. “You lot think you’re so –”

“Is there a problem here?” came Sinistra’s cool, easy tone from behind them. “The carriages are ready, you four – do get in.”

Adrian and Charles nodded dutifully, nudging Antares in front of them and giving pointed little looks to Ginny as she lingered behind, asking Sinistra about her trunk. They laughed as Sinistra firmly encouraged her to leave it on the platform and go on to the horseless carriage Antares and his friends were already getting into, her movements and words impatient. And when Antares followed them into the carriage, he was prodded into a seat on the same side as Adrian and Charles, despite his protests.

“What’s wrong with you both? This is so stupid – I don’t want to squeeze to bits between the both of you, just because I *might* touch some stupid little –”

And then Ginny was there, eyes flashing as she hoisted herself into the carriage. “Stupid little what?”

“Weasley,” Charles said, perfectly politely, as if in greeting, and though it was cruel, Antares almost laughed when she gritted her teeth and sat down on the other side of the carriage with a thump, because she’d walked right into that one. Adrian did laugh, until he was nudged by Antares, at which he just laughed harder and nudged Antares in the head.

“Fuck off,” Antares said irritably as Charles got in on the game, nudging Antares hard in the neck. Weasley sniffed loudly, which just irritated Antares further until he remembered that he’d promised Mum that he wouldn’t swear.

“What’s this?” Charles was saying, now, sounding mockingly surprised. “Is it a dog as well as a weasel, now?”

Adrian laughed. "I think we should check –"

"Touch me and I'll hex you so bad –"

"Dog," Charles said, nodding knowledgeably. "Definitely dog."

"I'm more of the opinion that it's a weasel, still," Adrian said thoughtfully. "Antares, what do you think?"

"I think I should've fought harder for the window seat," Antares said snidely, rolling his eyes. "Weasley, d'you know if we're there yet?"

Ginny just glared at him, too. "Get up and look, nancy boy –"

"Hey!" Adrian said indignantly. "That's a Black you're talking to, you piece of Gryffindor shit –"

Antares sighed irritably. What a bloody waste of time – "You know what, I think I'll just look myself –"

"No you won't," Charles said, tugging Antares back into his seat when he tried to stand up. "Weasley, get off your stupid arse and do what he said."

She sneered at him, not looking cowed in the least. "Make me," she said, coldly.

Adrian gave her a nasty grin. "Drop you out of the window? It would be my pleasure."

Ginny paled, but lifted her chin. "You wouldn't *dare*."

"Just you wait –"

"Will you all just shut up?" Antares said desperately, trying to twist his arm free of Charles' grip. "Charles, fuck off and let me – I said, *fuck off!*" He wrenched free of his irritated friend, lurching clumsily to his feet. Ginny shrank back in her seat a bit, and whipped her wand into view, but Antares ignored her, stumbling purposefully toward the window – he'd never thought he could get sick of Charles and

Adrian's antics, but this trip was on the last straw – "Oh, *finally* – we're almost there –"

"Antares, you sod, look what you did to my wrist," Charles said angrily, rising up to tug him back into his seat.

Antares tried not to shrink back, avoiding Charles' clumsy grab. "Charles, when I say fuck off, I *mean* fuck off. Leave me alone, you...hey!" Antares exclaimed, almost cracking his head on the tiny door handle nearby when the carriage lurched to a halt. "What the –"

"It's stopped, you moron," Ginny snapped, from behind him. "Open the door, all right?"

Glaring over his shoulder, Antares shoved the door open and stumbled out. *Tomorrow'll be a bloody nightmare*, he thought, watching Adrian and Charles try to trip Weasley on her way out of the carriage. Just the thought of all of them working in the greenhouses as they'd done last year was enough to give Antares a bloody headache, and that didn't take into account the fact that they'd have to sit with her at breakfast and lunch, or that they'd have to make sure she understood what she'd actually have to do as an Apprentice.

Shaking his head, Antares just strode for the open doors of the front hall to the castle. There really wasn't any point in thinking too long or too hard about the situation, especially since there was nothing he could do about it. With a sigh, Antares edged the thoughts of his friends and the new Weasley out of his mind, and focused, instead, on the delightful dinner that was now awaiting them in the Great Hall.

A/N: Christ, but this was a hard go. The outlining problems were the first thing, but actually writing the chapter was really hard for no good reason – like pulling pieces out of myself, almost. At 9000 words, I looked at it and just knew it wasn't finished yet, too. Ah well – hope you enjoyed it. Do feel free to review away and tell me this sucked, or point out any errors you found – I'm always grateful for help.

By the way, if anyone's got a nice papery base that's close to what an old diary would be made out of, could they email it to me or PM me or whatnot? Because I just had the most wicked idea for an icon, and all

I've got is a lousy parchment base, which, since THE diary is a muggle one, doesn't work.

ETA: *Re-uploaded this on the 23rd of October, 2006, after editing a few things. Nothing major changed.*

Chapter 5: The Pretence Begins

Honestly, Antares didn't know what he'd expected when he'd got up this morning, bleary-eyed and slightly bewildered about why he was in this bed again. He'd actually taken quite well to the weird feeling that Blaise should be there in the bed on his left, moaning about being woken up early. Or that Draco would come out of the showers any moment and laugh at Antares for something, anything.

Antares certainly didn't know why he was shocked now, watching the goings-on at the single table in the Great Hall. McGonagall was – she was almost *smiling*. Smiling. At Ginny Weasley. Paying *attention* to Ginny's nervous-looking questions, and obviously not in a hurry at all.

Antares hardly had a moment to examine the disgusted outrage starting to bud in his chest before Charles and Adrian bumped into him. They'd talked in sleepy tones behind him all the way here about toast and hot chocolate, but did not seem to be able to say anything just now. Well, except –

"The cow," Charles said slowly, disbelievingly. "Adrian, are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"I'm trying not to, but it won't stop," Adrian said, in a quiet tone. Antares looked up at him, and saw his outrage mirrored in Adrian's narrowed eyes. "Of course I can see it, you prick. Come on."

Charles muttered something angry and unintelligible, but he followed Adrian anyway, and even tugged half-heartedly at Antares' robe sleeve as he passed him. "You too, Black," he said, curtly. Antares followed in a daze, but not so deep within one that he didn't notice the way all the professors seemed to be looking at him; like he was something about to...what? Explode?

It was hard to sit down in the face of all those stares, but Antares did it. And, because he was still outraged (*lousy flea-bitten, favourite-keeping old cat*), he found himself giving everyone that was still looking at him a pointed glance. He ignored Snape, though, as well as Dumbledore – even if he hadn't known that Snape was as likely to stop glaring at Antares as to cut off his left foot, Antares would have

recognised that there wasn't much you could do against that sort of hate-filled stare apart from ignore it or meet it with one that was just as bad. Which he couldn't do.

Antares looked down at his hands, confused and angry, only to find that they were shredding uselessly at his bacon. He made himself eat it, and made himself ignore the freezingly polite comments being exchanged around him, most of them about the weather. Which reminded Antares to look up at the ceiling – no matter how many times he looked at it, it still surprised him a little – and wonder desperately how such a fine day could start on such a bad note.

Screw bad, Antares thought, stabbing a sausage onto his plate. He ignored the way half the professors seemed to start at the scrape, scowling absently at his plate instead. *This is going to be awful.*

He couldn't help glaring at McGonagall, just a little. With one stroke she was ruining any chances of Charles and Adrian (who had calmed down a bit last night with several reminders of the fact that nothing they did would stop Ginny Weasley from being an Apprentice) of being anything close to polite. Now, he'd be lucky if they didn't lock her in the greenhouse and try to get it knocked down.

And, seeing McGonagall's obvious readiness to please Ginny, Antares wasn't so sure he wouldn't join in. He forced himself to eat anyway, and wished the merrily chatting professor locked up in her tower.

Just as Antares didn't think he'd be able to stand anymore without rearing up to tell the table that McGonagall had spoken barely fifteen words to him on *his* first day here, Adrian nudged him sharply in the side.

"In a minute, we're going for the greenhouses," he said quietly. His expression was one of forced calm. "Let's see if McGonagall lets her precious Weasley come with us." Some seconds later, Charles stood up, shoving his chair back with a loud, rude scrape. Adrian followed suit, his expression hard.

Antares rose simply, taking care not to scrape too loudly as he felt more eyes land on him. Though he hated the idea, Bella's pointed

suggestion that he act a little more politely did seem more and more like it would make a difference, especially among the professors, who he was starting to think would relax if they saw he was just the same as he'd always been. Pushing his chair slowly back in place, Antares almost didn't hear the soft, steady question from the Headmaster.

"Done so soon, Mr. Black?" The noise of cutlery and conversation dimmed almost immediately, and Antares tried not to fidget with the way everyone was looking at him now.

"Well – um..." he trailed off for an instant, then remembered himself, gesturing towards Adrian and Charles, who had stopped to wait for him. "We're going to the greenhouses, as usual." Antares tried not to look at McGonagall, but didn't manage it. She was staring at him along with everyone else, so he didn't look at her long, returning his gaze to the Headmaster's kind eyes instead.

"Splendid," Dumbledore said. "Off you go." His expression was odd, somehow guarded. Remembering that strange afternoon when he'd called Antares aside and told him his parents had been murdered, Antares turned his eyes away from the old man's shrewd face. He couldn't help looking once more at McGonagall, though. It was outrageous; even after he'd openly said they'd be going to the greenhouses, she'd pretended that that didn't apply to Ginny, who she was still chatting to. Ginny herself looked only relieved to not have any of the other professors talking to her – much like Antares would have felt in her position, though the thought didn't make him any less angry at her or McGonagall.

Somehow, though, the sight of Ginny's nervous expression gave Antares pause. And, after a second, revealed an idea to him in a flash. "Weasley, are you coming?"

Ginny started in her seat, then looked at McGonagall uneasily. "Er – do I have to?"

McGonagall had stopped talking, and her stern, suspicious gaze was on Antares now, and it made him uncomfortable. But – "Yeah." – not quite enough that he would be backing down. "It's one of our duties as Apprentices," Antares explained, feeling even more uncomfortable

at the sharp look McGonagall and Dumbledore were now exchanging. "We've got to do it every year."

Ginny nodded in understanding, not seeming to notice that Dumbledore and McGonagall were both staring at her. "Right," she said, struggling to her feet. She didn't take half as much care as he did, and her chair scraped loudly enough that she flinched and didn't bother trying to push it back towards the table. "Er, which way are the _"

"They're outside, Weasley," Adrian said, from startlingly close by. Antares only just stopped himself from starting in surprise – he hadn't heard his friend come up behind him, that was for sure – "Come on, you two. Sooner we start, the sooner we finish." Antares, though conscious of the eyes on all of them, waited patiently for Ginny to blink and start following Adrian towards the double doors before starting after them himself. He walked casually, hoping that it all looked natural, but couldn't quite resist trying to take a peek back in McGonagall's direction just as they left the Great Hall.

"Hey, no peeking," Adrian said tugging him away from the doors. "Leave her to *wonder*."

"Yeah," Charles said resentfully, from ahead of them. "She deserves a little paranoia now and then, I think."

Ginny, who still looked quite nervous, gave Adrian an uneasy look. "Are you talking about –"

Adrian ignored her, giving Antares a wink. "And you just know the Headmaster'll be like – 'oh, such good chaps, those Apprentices, taking little Weasel under their wings' –"

"Don't call me –"

"Or what?" Adrian said coolly. "You'll tell on me? Go on, run back – I'm sure McGonagall's already worried about her little weasel –"

"Adrian, you're blocking the bloody door, you know," Antares said quickly, poking at him. "Didn't you just say –"

“And you,” Adrian said, suddenly rounding on him. “That was the most utterly, spectacularly *brilliant* idea you’ve ever had. Congrats – welcome to the Slytherin side.” He grabbed Antares’ hand and tried to shake it, but Antares, stung to the quick by the implied insult, wrenched his hand away.

“Can we bloody get on with this then?” he snapped. When Adrian only grinned at him, Antares shoved at him, elbowing his way outside into the courtyard. Charles was there, though, and he didn’t seem to get why Antares was irritated either, grinning as hard as he was.

“Touchy, touchy,” he said, turning to face Antares. “He’s right, you know.”

“Give him a bloody prize, then, if he’s so right,” Antares shot back. “Now, can we get on with this?”

But Adrian, still grinning, wasn’t done ribbing him. “Sarcasm, Charles!” he gasped, stumbling for Antares with wide open arms. “It’s all we ever dreamed of –”

Antares sidestepped him, biting down his irritation. “Come on, Weasley – greenhouses are this way.”

“Just marry her, Antares,” Adrian said mercilessly, his words forcing an involuntary blush to Antares’ cheeks. “Since you’ve been so bloody set on having her work with us –”

“What happened to you calling that a brilliant idea?” Antares said, trying to ignore Ginny’s indignant expression. It wasn’t as if he’d *asked* Adrian to say something so stupid –

“It was also a really stupid, pathetic one,” Charles explained slowly, as if to someone stupid. “Why’d you bother at all? It was like you wanted her with us, when you were just as –”

“What I want is to not spend all bloody morning in the fucking greenhouses, all right?” Antares said coldly, trying to keep his irritation out of his voice. Adrian would be all over that in a minute, if he sounded angry enough about it, and so would Charles. “You were

the ones whingeing about not being able to fly your brooms – well goodbye, opportunity to fly before lunch!”

“And I wouldn’t marry him if he *asked*,” Ginny added suddenly, into the thoughtful silence that had sprung up between them. “His mum was a –”

“Yeah, and your family lives with rats,” Charles snapped. “Leave off his mum, you stupid –”

“Both of you shut up,” Antares said, firmly. “Greenhouses, for god’s sake. Now!”

Adrian didn’t move. “So you’re just going to let her say –”

It was hard not to shout in frustration, with the spectre of being able to fly his broom well before term started floating ever further out of his reach, but Antares managed it. Well, almost. “She knows,” he said slowly, “I could make her cry in five minutes, talking about her family.” He gave Ginny a hard look, pouring all his irritation into it. “I’d get Blaise to write a song about your mum,” he went on, his tone as threatening as he could make it. “Half the school hates your older brothers, you know? They’d sing it. *You’d* sing it. I’d make you.” Ginny paled, but wouldn’t look down. Antares didn’t care, though – he’d made his point, if he wasn’t quite sure who he’d made it to.

Charles whistled nearby, and when Antares looked reflexively at him, his smile was tinged with something like approval as he glanced at Adrian, amused. “This just keeps getting better, doesn’t it?”

“Right in one, Charles,” Adrian said, smiling nastily at Ginny. “Though I still think you should marry her, Antares.”

Antares started walking, having already seen the expression on Adrian’s face that meant worse was coming. “When you’re done talking to yourself, Adrian.”

Obviously, he hadn’t started soon enough. “You know what they say, Antares – redheads are *great* in bed.”

It took a lot not to turn back, but Antares managed it, even with the curious half-squeal, half-snarl that someone had just made behind him. Antares, hearing the sizzle of a spell behind him, felt maliciously certain that it was Ginny.

It took longer than he'd thought for Adrian, Charles and Ginny to catch up to Antares on the way to the greenhouses, but by the time the familiar structures were drawing close, they were walking with him, their tense silence smothering Antares' slight impulse to start another conversation. He was too busy noticing things and being alarmed at what he'd noticed; that Ginny was over on his right, and that Charles and Adrian were walking in front of them rather than with them.

It made Antares sigh, and scowl. How things had got to this point, he didn't understand. What he did understand, though, was that he wasn't going to stand for anyone else telling him that he did or didn't belong in Slytherin, and so he stifled his urge to say anything when he glanced irritably around him and saw Ginny look away, quickly. Guiltily, as if *she* had been looking at him.

And when Antares shot a quick look at Charles and Adrian to see if they'd noticed, Charles was looking at him. Worse, Charles *winked* at him. Antares scowled harder. *There goes any chance of them not teasing me for weeks...*

When they reached the door, they found it locked, and, after a silent bit of awkward shuffling, all found seats on the thankfully dry grass nearby. Ginny sat next to Antares, and he wanted very much to push her away – couldn't she bloody see how this was turning Adrian and Charles against him? They were seated opposite Antares, and were exchanging amused looks that boded no good, and it was driving him *mad* –

Ginny shifted uncomfortably, sending a wave of weird-smelling – well, not so weird-smelling scent toward him. It smelt a little like the robes Bella always brought home to work on – robes that, come to think of it, Antares couldn't remember her bringing home since the bother in Flourish and Blott's –

Adrian started humming, and Antares suddenly realised what it is. His face burned as Charles took up the tune, too – it was a slightly strange version of the – the – wasn't it called the Wedding March?

Antares fished out his wand. Whatever it was called, he'd had enough. "*Instabilartus!*" he said sharply, flicking it hard in Charles' direction. He couldn't help but pause to admire the way his friend wobbled to the ground as his arm gave way, and that was probably why he missed Adrian in the next instant.

Ah well, Antares thought, nastily, *I'll just sting him instead. "Mordeo!"*

"*Adimo!*" Adrian said, but his Deflecting Spell was off, and the Stinging Hex only bent away from him and splashed into nothing against the door to Greenhouse 1. "*Mordeo –*"

Antares just sidestepped it, ignoring the slight wave of pain that washed over his right arm when he didn't quite succeed. "*Expelliarmus!*" He concentrated hard, willing the spell to yank Adrian's wand from his hand as quickly as possible, but was still a little surprised to see the wand do just that, cutting his friend off mid-incantation. "*Instabillartus – Expelliarmus –*"

Charles was openly laughing now, despite the fact that his wand was also streaking steadily toward Antares. Adrian didn't look half as amused – the Jelly-Legs had caught him in his left leg, and he was barely able to keep to his feet – "All right, all *right*, we'll stop!" Charles said, still gasping with laughter. "God but you're fast with that –"

"Still," Antares said coolly, feeling fiercely proud that Adrian had finally succumbed to the Jelly-Legs and flopped onto his arse, "I don't think I'll be giving you your wands back just yet."

"Good thinking, mate," Adrian said, his tone heavy with sarcasm. "Just stop it, all right? I can barely sit up –"

"If I ever hear you sing that stupid song again –"

"We know, we know – you'll Jelly-Leg us to death," Charles said, grinning. "Seriously, Antares, can you just *finite* it?"

“Don’t think so, actually,” Antares said, trying and failing to keep a grin from edging on to his face. “You two look just as comfortable as Weasley, here – the grass is quite nice, isn’t it?”

But Adrian and Charles weren’t looking at him anymore, and they’d stopped laughing, and Antares just *knew* that he was in trouble, as his neck was prickling horribly in a way that meant a Professor –

“What on earth is going on here?” Antares closed his eyes at Professor Sprout’s strident, certainly-not-cheery tone, but didn’t hesitate to try and answer.

“Oh, Professor – I was just –”

“You were just, what?” Sprout’s bushy eyebrows had knotted together horribly, and Antares couldn’t think of a thing to say. He waved Adrian and Charles wands uselessly, then moved to just end the stupid spells, so that he could explain.

“*Fini...*” Antares trailed off, staring at Professor Sprout. Why was she so pale? Wasn’t he – Christ. “*Finite. Finite incantatem,*” he muttered, not quite understanding why Sprout looked relieved. Charles was the first to get to his feet, and the way he snatched back his wand from Antares was a joy to see – he was grinning, as if it was all a great joke, and hopefully –

“Sorry for the fright, Professor,” Adrian said easily, not sounding angry or irritated anymore as he dusted himself off. “We were just – yeah, thanks, mate – we were just pretending to duel, see –”

Sprout seemed to have already recovered, for she bristled at the word ‘duel’. “Outside my greenhouses,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “Really, Warrington, Pucey – how thoughtless of you! You could at least have curbed young Black’s enthusiasm –”

“It was our idea, actually,” Charles cut in, his tone friendly as he cast an improbably fond look in Antares’ direction. The expression in his eyes, however, was mischievous. “We bet he couldn’t take either one of us out, and everything –”

“Duelling,” Sprout muttered, pushing past him to tap the door handle sharply. “And I thought Apprentices were supposed to set an example —”

Adrian and Charles exchanged a wicked look behind her back. “Aren’t we, though?” Adrian said innocently. “I mean, isn’t duelling an incentive to learn better defensive spells? You do know that Antares is best at DADA, it’s quite —”

“That’s enough from you, you two,” Sprout snapped. “You, Warrington — get watering. Weasley, follow him — don’t do anything until he’s told you which plants are safest. And I’ll be watching to see you re-pot those seedlings, Pucey, so no funny business...”

Next to the humiliating conversation he’d endured while getting there, working in the greenhouses with Adrian, Charles and Ginny wasn’t half as bad as Antares had thought it would be. Adrian and Charles couldn’t do much more than hum more strains of the Wedding March and grin irritatingly at Antares when Sprout wasn’t looking, and Ginny couldn’t do more than follow Charles around and worry childishly at her lip.

Antares, for his part, ended up planting disgusting-looking Mandrake seedlings in two large trays, a task that was much more difficult than it looked. At the end of it, he was covered in slime and had the vague beginnings of earache in both ears, and couldn’t stand to think about actually having to work with the horrid things once term really started. Professor Sprout had said something about them being time-delayed or whatnot — unless, he couldn’t see how they would have been at any sort of useful stage for them to study in Herbology sometime this week —

“That’s enough, I should think,” Sprout said, from over by Adrian. Antares bit his lip to keep from sighing — he was starting to be rather hungry, and positively couldn’t wait to get into a shower or bath of some sort. “You’ll want to clean up before lunch — you especially, Black. And mind you scrub hard — Mandragora residue is a little toxic at this stage. I assume you’ve got earache...?” A moment after

Antares nodded, something hard and small bumped him in the shoulder. "That should take care of it."

'That' was a vial of quite harmless-looking potion, which Antares was quick to open and sip from. It tasted awful, but then, he didn't want earache –

"...quite a good job on the vines, Pucey," Sprout was saying grudgingly. "Consider that as full marks on your first assignment."

Charles' cry was indignant. "But Professor –"

"You do like to believe I'm deaf, don't you, Warrington? Weasley, come away from that tray immediately – didn't I tell you to observe only? I'm of a mind to take points from the both of you, disregarding simple orders –"

"But Professor, she offered –"

"You told me she wouldn't mind!" Ginny retorted hotly. "And I didn't offer –"

"Dismissed, Weasley, and five points from your future house," Sprout said briskly, ignoring Charles' splutter of protest. "And ten from Slytherin, Warrington – yes, that's ten. You are more than mature enough not to mislead your younger ones, and I say –"

Antares, left, wholly uninterested in what Sprout had to say. His skin was starting to itch, and his stomach was starting to turn with hunger. And then there was the minor thing about maybe, *possibly* getting to fly his broom if he was fast enough at getting showered and eating lunch and everything – Charles' predicament didn't hold a candle to the thought of that. Antares barely realised Weasley was still with him until she asked him, sounding rather uncertain, if they had to go back into the castle and all the way up – or down, she hastily amended – to their houses to get a shower.

"Feeling pretty Gryffindor already, aren't we?" Antares couldn't help saying. "Don't worry, we use the Quidditch changing rooms for that."

Ginny looked almost absurdly relieved, which tickled Antares all the more, because he now knew she had to have been thinking of climbing all those stairs to Gryffindor tower. Which, if he recalled properly, was a long journey even with the Head of House getting the castle to do very strange things to help you along. “Then do you know where the changing rooms –”

“Just think about that question for a moment,” Antares said, in what he hoped his most sarcastic tone. “Really – just let it run through, let it sink in –”

“Shut up,” Ginny said, scowling, but Antares was already hard pressed to stop himself from laughing as they headed for the Quidditch changing rooms. They were empty and a bit chilly, and the seeming absence of any doors to the girls’ changing rooms caused them both a bit of confusion, but Ginny managed to turn up the creaky door to the Hufflepuff girls’ room halfway around the other side.

“You remember the way back to the Great Hall, don’t you?” Antares called out after her. “If you don’t –”

“I’ll find my way down on my own,” came Ginny’s indignant answer. “I’m not an idiot, not like Adrian and Charles have been sa –”

“It was a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question, Weasley,” Antares returned, rolling his eyes as he entered the Slytherin changing room. The door shut out her no doubt equally indignant answer, and Antares wasted no time in stripping and heading for a shower. He scrubbed himself as hard as possible, but took far less care than he normally would. Really, the less time he spent here, the more chance he had of getting to ride his broom, so he thought cutting corners was all right.

Charles and Adrian came in at the end of his shower, arguing loudly. It only took Antares a moment or so to understand that Sprout hadn’t been any kinder about the points she’d taken off Charles, and that Charles was blaming Adrian for convincing him to put ‘the Weasel’ to work.

“...and how come your ideas always end up putting me in trouble, then?” Charles was saying now, the bar of soap in his hand entirely forgotten. “I told you Sprout would notice –”

“Well next time, don’t make fun of me in front of my aunt,” Adrian snapped, looking a little more angry than usual. “You did that all holiday, and I didn’t do a thing – serves you bloody well right, getting on the wrong foot with –”

“Lunch starts in ten minutes, you two,” Antares said cautiously, drying his hair with one of the towels laid out in the lockers in the middle of the room. Sometimes, it wasn’t worth it to try and break up an argument, but he thought he might at least –

“You can eat that towel if it’s so bloody important to you,” Charles snapped, from behind Antares. That decided him – with a shrug, he got dressed and left the changing room as quickly as possible, taking care not to answer when Adrian called hotly upon him for his opinion on whether Charles was like an old woman about house points or not.

The walk back up to the castle seemed to take next to no time, despite the fact that Antares intentionally slowed down, revelling tentatively in the – in the *Hogwartsness* of it all. Sometimes he actually forgot he was in Scotland, here – everything around seemed to belong not to his childish memories of biting cold and sharp green sun, but to Hogwarts and everything that came with it. But then, he smelt a familiar plant, or looked up and away from the castle, and remembered that clear whistle of the air around him (it was windy today), and couldn’t help remembering his first glimpse of Bella in Wigtown, on a day much brighter than this.

In a few moments, though, Antares was darting through the slightly ajar front doors and heading for the Great Hall, and there was no more time for remembering that day. As he entered, everyone seemed to look at him, and it was hard to pretend a jaunty pace and slide into a seat somewhere as far away from both McGonagall and Snape as possible – all without looking like anything was wrong, like he didn’t want to eye Flitwick right back and see if the man still cared that he could learn Charms faster and better than anyone else in his year.

And then he noticed Weasley was absent, and stifled a groan. He’d forgotten entirely about Ginny in watching the whole nonsensical argument between Charles and Adrian – he’d thought to check on her

or something, before he left, no matter what she'd said. And look, now McGonagall was giving him suspicious glances as if he'd buried Ginny somewhere, and everyone seemed to be very cautiously noticing the absence of the other Apprentices, but not asking Antares anything outright.

I should've just stayed with her no matter what she said, Antares thought angrily, torn between pretending he had truly forgotten her and leaving the table to go and find her. It wasn't hard to get back to the castle from the general Quidditch area, really – it was just getting to the right point and not wandering all over the nearest wall looking for the front doors. And she didn't know how to do that –

"Mr. Black?"

Antares started, but managed to look attentive as Dumbledore spoke to him. "Er –"

"We were just wondering where the other three were," Dumbledore said casually, giving Antares a kindly smile that he didn't think he should trust. "Although it's only ten minutes since lunch started, we would like you all to finish at an appropriate time, as there's some discussion to be done on the subject of your timetables and such..."

"Right," was all Antares could say. That didn't sound like free flying time to him, and it made him want to groan – why this year, of all years, did the Headmaster suddenly decide to change –

"Of course, none of you will be able to speak with all your teachers," Dumbledore went on calmly, obviously ignoring the disturbance at the doors to the Hall. "Your Defence Professor – I believe you know of Mr. Lockhart? – will come in on this evening's train."

"Leave me *alone!*" *That* certainly got Dumbledore's attention – it was Ginny, looking more and more embarrassed by the minute as she staggered into the Great Hall, dripping what looked like green water. She froze a minute after – probably realised everyone's watching her – an action that didn't stop Peeves from floating after her and dumping one more merrily coloured water balloon on her head.

“Peeves, you scoundrel!” McGonagall exclaimed, rising from her seat almost immediately. Peeves stuck out his tongue at her, and, laughing wickedly, fled from the hall as McGonagall and now, Sinistra dried Ginny off and marched her to the round table, where everyone smiled at her in the way they’d used to at Antares and said rude things about Peeves. Only Snape stayed silent – he was *still* giving Antares the evil eye – but then he was always silent.

Antares smiled faintly at the jokes being made around him, and concentrated on taking out his irritation on his shepherd’s pie. By the time the guilty-looking Adrian and Charles finally came in, the table was merry with jokes and recollections of the Hogwarts ghosts’ most outrageous exploits from days gone by, though Antares wasn’t paying attention too closely. All he could keep thinking about was that they were wasting bloody time talking about how Nearly Headless Nick had nearly driven a student to fits early on in his eternal existence, time that could be put towards sorting whatever they needed to sort the fuck out. Time he could be spending on his broom –

“Oh, heavens, the time!” Dumbledore eventually said, looking awfully unsurprised despite the tone of his voice. “Minerva, I believe classroom eleven is finally cleared...? Good, we shall adjourn there.” The rest of lunch was taken up in people excusing themselves and occasionally pausing to chat with Ginny, Adrian or Charles, despite how hard Charles had been scowling all the way through lunch. Antares pretended not to notice, and wondered if he would go insane from all the pretending it looked like he was going to have to do.

The uncomfortable thought occupied him all the way to the so-called classroom eleven, and did so so thoroughly that by the time they reached the classroom, Antares was half-lost in a horrifyingly mesmerising daydream where he injured himself falling down a flight of stairs, and people just kept hopping over and stepping round him, until his leg inflated with soreness and pain and –

“Mr. Black? *Mr. Black?*”

Antares blinked, then coloured at the distinctly annoyed look McGonagall was now sending his way. “Erm –”

“Glad to know you’re with us,” she said repressively, handing him an oppressively neat-looking timetable. Antares coloured even more, especially when he saw that nearly all the professors in the room were giving him disapproving looks – even *Flitwick* – “If you find any causes for concern –”

Adrian materialised suddenly at his elbow, scanning his timetable with an agitated air. “Of course there’s a problem!” he said hotly, seizing the thing and stabbing angrily at an unfortunate bit of the parchment, “Antares has Quidditch practice with us on Tuesdays – he can’t have Apprenticeship class then –”

“As far as I understand it, Mr. Black here is not yet on your Quidditch team,” McGonagall said sharply.

“But he will be!”

McGonagall’s lips thinned. “Until then, his class on Tuesday –”

“We have the same problem as well, Professor,” Charles cut in, looking scandalised. Antares snuck a look at one of the two timetables Charles held, and sure enough, there was an Apprenticeship class at the very end of the others listed under ‘Tuesday’. “Is there no way –”

“I do not make it my practice to reschedule classes merely for the convenience of students,” McGonagall said firmly. “Your professors held that this timetable is most convenient for them, so it stands –”

“And how come there are so many more classes, anyway?” Adrian demanded, handing Antares’ timetable back to him without a backward glance. “Last year –”

“Last year was the last year of a fairly long-running experiment,” someone said stiffly from over to the left, where most of the professors were seated. The person speaking now was a dark-skinned woman with an oddly calculating expression. “We –”

Professor McGonagall sighed irritably, cutting the woman off. “Vivian, there is no need to tell them –”

"They asked, Minerva," Vivian said, shifting lazily in her chair. "Questions should be answered. Now, as I was saying –"

"You mean you were experimenting on us?" Charles said indignantly. "But that's –"

"Who else were we to? We wished to see what length of class time would produce the best results, and we did." Vivian shook her head slightly. "The results were not promising."

Flitwick snorted, surprising Antares. "Vector, you are indeed the queen of understatement."

Vivian – no – Vector shot the squat professor a rather irritated look, but he gave her no time to say anything. "Several promising students fell behind their peers," Flitwick explained, ignoring how Vector was now glaring at him. "The experiment was primarily focused on the lower years – we supposed productivity might increase if they had fewer classes a day, as the sixth and seventh years do. Unfortunately, that was not the case."

"Well," Vector said, almost a little peevishly, "Black didn't. Neither did Pucey, nor Warrington." Antares tried not to feel proud at that. He almost managed it, with the way the seated professors were now eyeing him, but – he suppressed a grin – not quite. They could make him feel like a leper, yeah, probably. But they'd never say he was anything but a *smart* one –

"What was worse, the new muggleborns had the worst time," Flitwick went on, staring thoughtfully into space. "Except for Granger, I suppose, and one or two others – but the rest..." he shook his head.

"It was inevitable," another professor said testily. Antares tried to think – wasn't the man – "I told all of you that less class time would just compound the problem, didn't I? They're used to more of a course load than what we normally have – almost twice as much –"

"Bollocks," Adrian muttered under his breath. "Hogwarts has the highest course load in Europe –"

"Lowest," Antares said, shaking his head. "Last year, anyway."

“What would you know about it?” Charles asked, giving him a bewildered look. “You never –”

Antares rolled his eyes. “Where’d you think I learned to write?”

Adrian gave him a scornful look. “Hmm, I don’t know, Antares – maybe your mother?”

“Not everything,” Antares said irritably. Adrian said it like Bella had had time to swan around – around gardens, or something, teaching Antares all sorts of things. Was he really daft enough to think that they had enough money for that? “She had work,” Antares said, instead of asking anything insulting. Adrian shot a confused look in Charles’ direction, but Antares went on anyway – it couldn’t be *that* hard to understand – “I went to primary school for a bit – it was easier.”

“Primary school?” Adrian said, his eyes widening incredulously. “*Muggle* Primary –”

“Yeah, Muggle primary school,” Antares snapped. “What’s the big deal? Like I said, my mum worked! And anyway if she’d had to teach me more than writing, we’d have ended up killing each – each...er.” Great Morgana, *everyone* was staring at him now. Antares forced up a weak smile – had he been that loud?

McGonagall cleared her throat, giving everyone in the room a stern look before she spoke again. “Then there are no objections to the timetable? No conflicts?”

Everyone murmured answers in the negative. Antares’ protest stuck in his throat when he glanced up at Adrian and Charles – they looked just as uncertain as they had done on the train, and –

“Well then! The meeting is over.” McGonagall rearranged the few rolls of parchment she’d brought along – not that Antares had seen her unroll one enough to put the others out of order. “We’ve assigned you this classroom for your Apprenticeship classes – all that business of reporting to different offices is quite over. So when you have an Apprenticeship class, you will report here, as will your professors.”

McGonagall, ignoring the professors that were already leaving, gave each of the students a look. “Any questions? No? Excellent.”

“Pro – professor?” Ginny piped up, nervously. Charles and Adrian shot her glares, but Antares couldn’t be bothered to. A tiny little *Tempus* had just told him that it was just about 3 o’clock, and since none of the professors seemed eager to stay and teach them anything extra – “What are we supposed to do now? I don’t think everyone’s here yet for a few hours, and –”

“Oh, that’s quite simple,” McGonagall said, giving Ginny another one of those faint smiles. Antares forced a sneer off his face – no way was he ruining his chances at having a good long fly just because McGonagall was so – “Come with me, dear – I’ll sort you out.” She headed smartly for the door, Ginny trailing her uncertainly, with a swift glance back at Antares. Which he pretended not to see.

“Finally,” he breathed, instead, waving away the ghostly numbers that were still hovering down at his right. “I can’t *wait* to fly...” He grinned a little to himself, already feeling the air whistling wildly in his ears –

In the next moment, Charles’ sharp voice abruptly dispelled his little daydream. “Your mum never worked,” he said, crossing his arms, a small scowl on his face. “It was a good way to startle the professors, yeah, but –”

Antares stared at him. “Why would I lie about that?” he demanded, but already he knew what they were thinking was the answer, and it both sickened and irritated him. “Look, did you ever hear of any of the Blacks, except about them dying of old age?”

“Antares –”

“Hear me out, for fuck’s sake,” Antares demanded, ignoring how Adrian started a little at that. “Look – right. The last few Blacks around lived at Grimmauld Place, but haven’t for about five or six years now, if I remember right. And neither of us has been seen there, for years. It’s the only Black house my mum *can* go to – her mum and dad disowned her, and she hasn’t been on speaking terms with her sisters since – since *everything*.” Antares glared at his friends, not caring that it made him look more suspicious – if there was anything

that angered him, it was how people seemed to dismiss the fact that Bella had had to stand on her own feet, completely on her own, for ten bloody years. To hear the same thing from his friends –

Well. He'd *make* them understand. "My mum was left nothing in any of the right wills," he said angrily. "The Lestranges won't speak to her – why would they, when she betrayed her husband?"

Adrian's eyes widened. "But you – doesn't that mean –"

"I don't care what you think about me. I don't even care who you think my dad is – I don't know, and I don't care. I do know that my mum didn't have a Black penny to her fucking name, and I do know she worked her fingers off for the both of us. Don't believe me? Fine. I just never want to hear you say my mum never worked again." Antares' mouth felt dry, after all that, and he couldn't quite summon the strength to look his friends in the eye. "If it's all the same to you, I'm going out for a fly." He headed sharply for the door, tension tied thick in his chest – god, but he shouldn't have even *started* –

Adrian's tone almost stopped him. "But Antares –"

Antares turned vaguely in his direction, but for a different reason than either of his friends might have thought. "And Merlin, if I ever hear anything from anyone that makes me believe you told someone –" he shook his head jerkily, almost a little desperately, then decided to leave it hanging. They were afraid of him, weren't they? It would be enough.

The abrupt silence in the room that settled after his threat seemed to follow him out into the cool corridor. Antares gritted his teeth against it and headed for the entrance hall, so he could get down to Slytherin and grab his broom. He bloody well deserved that fly now.

Despite everything, it was a glorious fly. There wasn't a soul out on the Quidditch pitch but Antares, and it made him feel free. Free to try and fit himself and his new, wonderful broom through one of the nearest golden hoops. Free to swerve aside at the last moment when the thought of being trapped up there if he failed occurred to him.

Free to dive down, and spiral around the rod that held the solid-looking hoop up –

It made Antares' head spin madly as he pulled out of that dive, but by then, he was too strung up on the smell and taste and feel of the air around him to care. He just swivelled over and over, made a weak effort at diving for a random patch of grass, and kept on flying.

Higher up, the wind was stronger. It whistled shrilly around him, like a train, like the train that would be bringing hundreds of hateful stares and whispers here this evening –

Antares drowned his panic in another dive, then another, then another. New panic caught at him at the top of each soaring climb, and fluttered away against the pull of gravity and the shrieking of the wind in his ears on his way down. It never really went away, though – by the time Antares circled his third *Tempus* spell in the air, he was still a little stiff with panic, and the thick black letters before him showed just enough time for him to be ready for the Feast.

Gritting his teeth, Antares spun and tore through the already fading letters, and took off on one last, sharp soar. Panic climbed with him, matched him speed for speed, spiral for spiral. He only dived when he couldn't feel anything but the wind and his dread, and that dive tore at him, tore the breath out of his mouth until he was almost suffocating in its force. He pulled out a moment later, biting his lip in fear and exhilaration when his speed almost didn't let him do so, driving his broom towards the ground at a gentler angle, but with no less force.

Antares' landing was rough, spilling him off the broom and hard onto the grass enough to knock the breath out of him, but it felt good. He didn't feel, anymore, like he was brimming with rage and fear. He felt mostly tired and panicked, which he thought he could handle.

He rose slowly, stroking the broom as he told it to settle. It did so, obliging him immediately, and Antares felt better about his silly habit of talking brooms down after he was done with them. He knew it wouldn't last – knew, miserably, that this clear, simple tiredness wouldn't last, so he held the feeling tightly to himself as he trekked off for the changing rooms for the second time today.

A swift shower later, Antares was on his way to the Great Hall. His robes were a little wrinkled from all the robing and disrobing he'd done today, but they would do all right. Wasn't like it was going to be a particularly pleasant or special meal, this Feast, so it didn't bother him much. His hair was still a little damp, though, which worried him – if he didn't dry it thoroughly with a spell, it was always absolutely awful to manage –

Just as he came within reach of the castle doors, a loud rumbling set up. Stupidly alarmed, Antares found himself looking up and down for the train before he remembered belatedly that Hogwarts didn't have a special platform, and that the students would have to come in some other...

...way. Antares stared his fill at the strange carriages while he could – they looked so heavy, and yet nothing drew them. And he couldn't hear anything in the rumbling the wheels made against the path that sounded like anything that wasn't just that – heavy carriages on heavy wheels, on the gravelly path up to the castle.

The doors opened behind him, and Antares jumped, only to find that it was just Professor Flitwick, looking just as startled as he was.

"What are you doing out here?" Flitwick asked, impatiently. "Go on – might as well sit down with the other apprentices." Antares held back a sigh – Flitwick wasn't looking him quite in the eye – but did as he was told, slipping into the Great Hall and heading for the Slytherin table. Ginny was nowhere to be seen – probably still being coddled by McGonagall – but Adrian and Charles were seated at the Slytherin table, loudly discussing the contents of what looked like Quidditch magazine.

Antares, a little stung by the way they seemed to ignore him, let his eyes flit up to the high table, and noticed only a few of the professors were actually there. Dumbledore wasn't, and neither was McGonagall. Weirdly enough, Snape wasn't present either – it puzzled Antares a little, until he realised that the man might now be just finishing off that 'talk' with Dumbledore that he and Bella had kept referring to back at Snape's home.

Antares shrugged, then, to himself. It wasn't really anything to be worried about. What he *should* be worried about was how Adrian and Charles were pointedly discussing their magazine and not even sparing him a glance –

The noise of chattering students began to trickle in little by little. It increased as people started to actually come in, and increased still more as waves after waves of Hogwarts students entered the Hall, all of them seeming to glance in the direction of the Slytherin table at least once on their way to their chosen seats.

For his part, Antares played indifferently with his cutlery, and pretended to be wholly uninterested in the way half the gradually filling Ravenclaw table was staring at him. It was hard – it was like a thousand eyes were running over him, just now, noting his damp hair and stubby nails and the fact that no one was sitting anywhere near him, or even directly in his line of sight –

"There he is," someone said, and Antares stiffened in reaction until he realised it was Tracey, and she was grinning at him as she came up. "You git, why weren't you on the train?"

"Apprentices are supposed to come down early," Antares replied, unable to hold back a nervous smile. "Didn't I ever say?"

"No," Tracey said, shrugging. She dived under the table and resurfaced in the seat across him, earning some annoyed looks from further down the table. "Though I should probably have figured it out, what with you saying Pucey and Warrington were there with you the first time. Hey, Blaise – this way!"

"No need to shout," Blaise's voice said from nearby. He popped into view a minute later, looking dishevelled and rather put-out as he slid into one of the empty seats beside Antares.

Tracey shrugged unrepentantly. "If I hadn't, you wouldn't have found us."

"Yeah, right," Blaise said sarcastically, but in the next moment, he was scrutinising Antares so hard that he felt like it should hurt. "You all right?"

“Duh,” was all Antares said, but he held on to the almost painfully warm feeling that that question had brought, all the same. “What happened to you on the train, anyway? You’ve what – three hairs out of place?”

“Fuck off,” Blaise muttered, nudging him in the side. Antares smiled – for one moment, everything felt astonishingly normal. Just as he was about to tease Blaise for his bad language, the illusion broke.

“Well, well, well,” Draco Malfoy said, from behind him. “I always knew a halfblood couldn’t be as powerful as you are – I suppose I was right.” He sat down with an irritating thump in the empty space on Antares’ other side, an innocent smile on his face. “Even if you’re the very worst sort of pureblood, it is nice to be proved right.”

Antares said nothing. What was there to say? And, besides –

“So tell me, Black,” Draco said, emphasizing the last word as if it was filthy, “what *did* dear old mum get up to all those years? Alone, unmarried, unemployed...or was she?”

“Just shut it, Malfoy,” Antares finally let himself say, trying vainly not to sound like he wanted to strangle Draco right this very moment. He did, yes, but not without kicking his face in and stuffing his hands into his mouth and making him take back every single fucking word first, though, as well as every single rumour he just *knew* Draco had been spreading about him. No.

Draco grinned, not seeming to sense how close he was to Antares’ breaking point. “And what if I don’t?”

Antares sucked in a sharp breath, trying valiantly to keep his eyes on the table. It wasn’t that he didn’t know anything he could do. It was just that none of his options was bad enough that he’d be able to throw off the enormous, snarling curl of anger inside him. Maybe he could use *that* to strangle Draco –

Draco laughed. “Coward. Always knew you were –”

“And I suppose you know that because you’re the bravest person in our year,” Blaise retorted. Antares didn’t want to look up at his friend’s

expression, so he just continued to twist the fork in his hands. But it helped, a little, that Blaise seemed to be using his most derisive tone on Draco, right now – “Brave enough that Antares had to goad you into actually facing *Lupin* in a duel –”

“He did not –”

“Brave enough that you nearly wet your pants when Quirrell came in screaming about that troll,” Tracey said, her tone just as mocking as Blaise’s. “You’d probably’ve left Daphne to die down there if it’d save your pasty skin.”

“We understand your problem, Draco,” Blaise said, sounding fakely sympathetic, “he’s ever so much better than you are at Quidditch –”

Tracey snorted. “And magic, and schoolwork –”

“Pretty much in everything except being a nosy, pasty, foul-mouthed little git,” Blaise finished, his tone hard.

“And who died and made you judge, Zabini?” Draco sneered. “Not like you’ve got any sort of moral capacity, with that mum of yours –”

“Let me guess, Draco – to be a Malfoy’s to be a saint?” Blaise laughed nastily. “We both know if my mum wanted your dad, she’d have him in a minute. From what she says, it’s a mystery your mum ever got pregnant –”

“The next time I see you talk, Zabini, you’ll be the first fool to lose us House Points this term,” Snape said suddenly, from frighteningly nearby. “And you, Black – dredge up whatever manners you’ve been taught and sit like a wizard.” Antares straightened immediately, hoping that Snape would just – “And my, my, my, aren’t we light-fingered – replace that cutlery *immediately*, or you’ll know the reason why.”

Antares blinked in surprise. “But I wasn’t –”

“Detention,” Snape said, anger lacing his tone tight enough that no one dared to even whisper, “and ten points for disputing the opinion of a professor.”

Antares stifled his retort, knowing it would be useless. He laid the stupid, cursed fork on the table carefully, trying hard to reassure himself that this was all planned, all part of the plan, and that Snape didn't really –

"If I hear another word from this end of the table, Black, you will be sorry," Snape said, quietly, almost as if he was just speaking to Antares. As if the whole table couldn't hear him, wasn't straining to hear – "And you, Calsworth – meet me in my office as soon as this wretched meal is over."

It took a lot for Antares' hands to remain steady until Snape walked away. After that, they couldn't stop shaking. It just felt – just felt like – it felt *real*, and fit in painfully close with the way Draco was smirking at him and Tracey now, with the way some of the third years were giving him sideways glances that didn't say anything nice. For a long, long moment, Antares felt like he was going to be sick.

Somehow, it didn't happen. Either Tracey nudged his arm, or Blaise kicked his foot, or the appearance of the food on their tables calmed him some more, or –

Or everyone was looking at him, whispering about him, and yet he couldn't hear more than a few. Antares bit hard into his turkey sandwich and tried not to think about the taunts. Or Snape. Or his classmates, or the professors, or anything except how much he longed, *longed* to be at home in front of the fire, toasting something, being angry at Bella, at Snape – the real one, that picked his teeth and snored very quietly and had strangely hairless arms that were good at making delicate dishes, but not – not this one, not –

Then the first years marched in, and Antares finally had something else to think about. McGonagall almost – well, *preened* at the head of the line. She kept casting tiny little looks down at Ginny, who looked dwarfed and very nervous in her robes, and was fidgeting something awful. Antares pretended not to see the way Draco was mimicking his actions beside him, instead choosing to be smug that he hadn't fidgeted half as much as Weasley was doing when it had been his turn –

Draco, Greg and Vincent all began to laugh quietly. Antares, grinding his napkin in his hands, didn't hear a single word of the Sorting Hat's song. Clapping for the first Slytherin Sorted was a near thing – he was too dazed from anger, from sick humiliation that he had to just sit here and take this, and he couldn't –

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Antares almost clapped at that one, before realising it was the last person to be Sorted, and it was Ginny Weasley, and he couldn't clap for a Gryffindor. Blaise was saying something loudly and indifferently about her, something about the Hat taking it's time. Draco's eyes weren't the least bit interested in that. Draco's eyes were more interested in exchanging glances with the third years over his own immaculate shoulder and raking over Antares' shabby sleeves as if –

“...and let the feasting begin!” Dumbledore looked peaceful, almost excited, as if he probably hadn't seen fifty of these things go by the same way. McGonagall's lips were thinner than normal, as if she had to compress her excitement more just now, as she sailed off with the Hat and the stool. For an eerily long moment, Antares hated her – bouncing around, practically (for her, anyway), when he was doing all he could to not start stabbing people with the golden cutlery that someone had accused him of stealing –

“No wonder you ate so much at your first feast, Black,” Draco was saying. “Probably never seen that much food in your life –”

“Shut it, Draco,” Blaise said shortly. “What's wrong with you, d'you want Snape on our case again?”

“On *our* case?” was all Draco said, smirking. It was all he needed to say, really. It made Antares nearly choke on his piece of potato, how smug Draco sounded, and yet, it *was* how he was supposed to feel about it all. It was just – just so *unfair* – “God, Black, cover your mouth –”

“Or didn't your mum teach you manners?” A third year said, from further down the table. “Merlin knows she had time to teach you other things –”

Antares put his fork down. Then his knife, a little more quickly. It wasn't a good idea to have a weapon on him at this point, so –

“Go on then, Black,” someone else said. “Give us a show, yeah?”

Someone gripped his shoulder, making him start. “See, that Ravenclaw – stun her –”

“No, make her stop breathing –”

“Oh come on, you lot, aim higher!” the first third year urged, sounding gleefully sarcastic. “You never know, he might actually do it –”

“Get off,” Antares found himself saying, his voice strained. When the hand on his shoulder only tightened, he stood up, satisfaction tearing through him as the idiot behind him stumbled in surprise. In a thrice he was over the bench and shoving them hard out of the way, barely hearing the taunts or heeding the way people were giggling openly now. He just headed straight for the double doors and tried not to think of what he would do if he was stopped, or touched by anyone.

It turned out he didn't have to – the Ravenclaw seventh years watched him leave with cynical smiles, and no one called out his name except to say something nasty, or laugh. Cool air hit his heated face as he left the Great Hall, but it didn't strip away the humiliation gathering thickly at the back of his throat.

Turning sharply, Antares nearly fell over himself in his haste to get down the stairs to the dungeons. He tried not to go too fast, but couldn't help speeding up as he finally reached them – the cool, damp smell made his teeth chatter, and the only way to stop that was to run.

He did, for a minute, just darting blindly down passages – most of which he knew. *I won't get lost*, Antares told himself, panting a little with the effort of it, *I can't. It would be so stupid* –

He stumbled a little, almost fell, and that was the end of the running. Antares slowed down abruptly, feeling somehow adrift, somehow useless. This wasn't going to change anything. If anything, it would

only make things worse, him leaving the feast so openly. But if he'd stayed –

"Does your mum teach you cutting curses? Bet she does..."

Antares shook his head, hard, and began to retrace his steps, heading for the Occlumency dungeon. It was his dungeon, almost. He could lock the door, he could sit, he could just stare at the dusty furniture in it for a bit – it would calm him down. It had to. If he stayed this angry, it would only end in him putting his fist in someone's rich, spoiled face, and it wouldn't take much more than that to have him on probation. And it would make things harder for Bella.

Antares entered his dungeon slowly, sighing as he saw the familiar outlines of chairs and a table in the darkness. Turning, he closed the door, then hesitated for a moment.

"Offirmo," Antares muttered, ignoring the guilt. He needed something strong; something few people would think to try and break. He'd just make sure to get out on time, so that he wasn't locked out for Slytherin for the night.

By the time Antares left the Occlumency dungeon, he was sick of staring at stone, and starting to feel quite light-headed; whether it was from fear, worry or both, he did not know. Not that they felt separate from any of his feelings anymore – if he was locked out of Slytherin tonight, Snape would –

"There he is," a tall, burly seventh year said, turning toward him impatiently. Antares felt an involuntary urge to turn and run as he approached the group of older Slytherins standing about the door to the House – stupid, but probably not that stupid. Hopefully –

A short, red-haired girl turned towards him, and glared. Antares swallowed, but forced himself to keep moving for the door to Slytherin.

Don't show fear, just keep going –

Perhaps that was why he didn't see the first fist. Someone struck him in the shoulder, hard, and Antares tried to turn and run, but they had him surrounded and he shouldn't have come *back* –

"Black slime," the red-haired girl snarled, her hand curled so tight around her wand that her knuckles were white. "You and your traitorous bitch of a mother –"

"Don't –"

Someone hit him from behind, as if that was the signal. Antares fought for moments, then, realising his stupidity, tried to curl and protect himself, but the hands of his attackers were determined, and obviously knew their stuff. Someone forced him onto the floor so they could kick him, and stamped on his fingers several times. Curses and insults filled his ears, mingling with the roar of pounding blood until Antares was no longer sure –

It ended suddenly. One moment, Antares was shuddering from the impact of a kick in the shoulder, and the next people were jumping over him and slipping away, into what seemed like nothing, but Antares knew – Slytherin. He tried to move, tried to stretch out his hand, madly thinking the door wouldn't close –

He heard it grind closed, and felt cold and pain bite him hard, forcing tears up from somewhere he'd forgotten. They didn't last long, because his face hurt, and the tears made it worse.

Antares picked himself up off the floor somehow. He didn't remember how, after he was done – just shivered against the wall that could lead to Slytherin, but wouldn't, because he didn't know the password, and –

Fuck. Footsteps –

"Black?" Snape. "What on earth are you still doing outside? It's past ten!" Snape swept up to him, not seeming to see anything but a disobedient student until Antares shivered involuntarily from the draft the Professor brought with him.

He barely heard Snape's sudden sharp words, and only vaguely registered the feel of the spell the man used because Bella had used it so many times –

Antares bit his lip savagely hard, ignoring the blood. He wouldn't cry now. He couldn't. But for a long moment, it felt like he was about to, especially with Snape standing over him with that almost pitying look on his face as he went on and on and on about how this was part of the plan –

"You understand why I may not heal everything," Snape was saying, eyes intense. "Boy, are you listening?"

Antares nodded, numb.

"Good." Snape half turned, then paused, as if he'd just – "I – I thought I should tell you. Tomorrow morning will not be...pleasant."

Antares blinked, but before he could form any kind of answer, Snape was off, striding away from him. Antares looked down at his hands, suddenly realising that that was all Snape had done – heal them. So he could – so he could work, could –

Antares swallowed, binding the thought, the terrifyingly strong wave of indignation sweeping through him. All – all *this* happened, and he was just supposed to work, to pretend –

The door to Slytherin began to slide open, making Antares jump. Looking around, he saw nothing but the stone and damp, and, after a tired scan of the area he could see before him, headed into the Slytherin common room. It was empty, a blessing, and Antares limped gratefully for his dorm, thanking Morgana that he'd thought to lock his trunk and hide his things before leaving earlier on. If the Slytherin seventh years could beat him up and get away with it, Draco would definitely rifle through Antares' things, stealing and ridiculing as he went along.

Not that he felt like it mattered now. What was the fear of Draco's filthy hands rifling through his things to the fact that people from his own house had just beaten him up? It wasn't like they wouldn't, or couldn't do it again. Wasn't like Snape would stop them.

Antares stood still in the hallway that led to his dorm, unable to move for the anger inside. *I'll get them back*, he told himself, rubbing emptily at his shivering limbs. It didn't warm him, so he tried again, putting fiercer resolution behind the promise. *I'll make them pay*. That satisfied, somehow, and he was moving again, limp or no. Antares urged himself along with vivid thoughts of how he'd get back at each and every one of them – especially that red-haired *bitch*, calling Bella such names.

What he refused to tell himself, as he finally shambled into the dorm, was that he had no idea how.

A/N: Jesus H. Christ, but this was a surprise. I was horribly worried that this chapter would go awry, would fall flat, would be too weak – and it didn't. I suppose most of that is subjective, and just my opinion, but I just really feel like I'm on track with this. I'm definitely getting back in the zone now, and it's a relief.

Next chapter will be called Chapter 6, and will feature Antares' first few classes/days at Hogwarts. I'll make up the bloody title as I go along, since that's what I end up going with half the time.

Chapter 6: Early Days

"I still can't believe it," Blaise muttered, early the next morning. He'd helped Antares into his bed last night, miraculously free of questions, and, this morning, had quietly forced him to sit down and let him fetch a salve as soon as he heard Antares moving slowly around the dorm. "Is he that stupid? Your mum would go mental if she found out how he just left you like that."

Antares froze, his hand still in the jar of salve. "But – I – how did you know?"

Blaise blinked, then grinned at him, and Antares wanted to curse himself – god, how stupid was it to fall for such an easy – "Well, I know *now*," Blaise said smugly, passing him what Antares strongly suspected was one of his handkerchiefs. "Wait till I tell Tracey, she was dead certain Sn –"

Antares glared at him. "Sshh!! If anyone's awake –"

"Don't 'sshh' me," Blaise said, but his voice was far lower, and he actually ducked backwards through the curtains on the other side of his bed to look at the other boys. Evidently satisfied, he turned back towards Antares. "As I was saying," he said, the small grin returning, "Tracey thought *he* wasn't doing anything with your mum. Went on and on about it being a joke on your part." Blaise's grin got wider. "I can't *wait* to see the look on her face –"

"Shut up," Antares muttered, peering at the – it was a handkerchief. "Blaise, this isn't –"

"Shut up and use it," Blaise ordered, immediately. "The elves'll get it clean again, if that's what you're worried about."

"Blaise, I'm still bleeding! It'll –"

"If you want to bleed to death, just say so," Blaise said, shrugging. "If you don't, I'm not taking it back from you."

"Wounds as small as this don't kill people," Antares grouched, but he wound up tying the soft, clean thing around the wound on his knee. It

was partially scabbed over now, but still hurt like hell, and Antares just knew it had stained his sheets. Last night, he'd been too tired and miserable to care, but now he cringed at the sight of his bloodstained sheet, which looked more like evidence from the scene of a crime than the bed he'd slept in last night.

"I still can't believe he didn't even bother to clean it," Blaise grumbled, scrambling off his bed and leaning forward to peer at the spot of blood already visible on the makeshift bandage.

"He did do this spell," Antares said, feeling almost a little defensive. "It's one I know, yeah? And it got the wounds clean –"

"That must've hurt," Blaise said, sympathetically. Antares shrugged – he remembered being too bloody angry and humiliated to think about the pain, so – "I can't wait to see those bullying bastards' faces when they see we've lost points –"

Antares, though he now thought he understood why, couldn't help feeling a little angrier at what he was about to say. "He didn't take any, Blaise," he said quietly. "He said it would be –"

"You mean Sna- you mean he's not going to punish them?" Blaise's eyes were wide. "But that's so –"

"According to him, he didn't even find me last night, so he doesn't know," Antares said, slowly, bitterly, remembering some of Snape's words that he'd ignored then. "It would make people suspicious, anyway."

"And where does that leave you?" Blaise snapped, startling Antares. "It's all right for him, he's not got seventh years out for his blood –"

"If they found out, they might be," Antares said wearily. Blaise gave him a doubtful look, but let him keep talking. "It's – I think he might punish them if they try it again, openly, but..."

"Cold-hearted bastard," Blaise muttered. Antares felt tremendously like saying the same thing, but didn't; he knew it wouldn't do any good. "Come on – I think the Hospital Wing opens before breakfast."

“What if it doesn’t?” Antares asked, but he was half on his feet already, and thought he might know the answer to that. But he didn’t want to make Blaise feel like –

“We’ll stay there until it does,” Blaise said firmly, forcing Antares into a thick, comfortable dressing gown he’d produced from his trunk. “Come on.”

The trip up to the Hospital Wing...well, there wasn’t much that didn’t hurt, and Antares’ eyes were half shut and his teeth gritted against the pain by the time they reached their destination. The Hospital Wing was indeed open, to his relief, and the knowledge that help was within reaching distance gave Antares the strength to limp through the door and straight for the first empty bed he could see.

“What on earth –”

Antares tried hard to keep from hunching over or lying down as he sat, but that hurt too. So he braced himself up with his arms and tried not to wince too much when he found that they hurt, too.

“What can you have been doing to yourself, Mr. Black?” Madame Pomfrey demanded, advancing on him much like Snape might, after spotting a troublemaker. “Oh, your *knee* –”

“He fell all the way down the stairs on the way to the dungeons last night,” Blaise said quickly, giving Antares a pointed look that made him swallow the hesitant lie he’d been about to tell. “Great git didn’t want to bother you till I made him come up this morning, so –”

Pomfrey pursed her lips at Antares, now busy checking his head. “At least one of you’s sensible,” she grouched, now shifting her attention to the makeshift bandage on Antares’ knee. “Now, let’s have that raggy bandage off and see the damage.”

Antares complied stiffly, trying desperately to hide how much it hurt to bend over and tug the bandage off. Which hurt, in and of itself, because the cool air of the wing felt like needles against his knee.

“*Celere Sano*,” Pomfrey said promptly, twitching the bloodied handkerchief out of Antares’ trembling fist and waving her wand over

the wound. "And lie down before you fall down, Black – you boys are all the same with that useless bravado." She bustled off to one of her cupboards as he succumbed gratefully to the softness of the hospital bed beneath him, clattering vials about like no tomorrow. "Now where is that – aha!" A few minutes later, Antares felt himself being coaxed into a half-sitting position by what felt like an odd, raw warmth. He twisted feebly around to see if Blaise – but no, there wasn't anything beneath him.

Pomfrey easily noticed his fidgeting, and gave him an oddly kind smile. "It's a spell, Black. Now, drink up."

Antares drank. The potion that had been offered him tasted sickly sweet and utterly strange, but its empty vial felt somehow familiar in his hand. At a glance, it was revealed to be a fairly popular potion for treating non-magical bruises and scrapes – usually it went on your skin, and burned like hell. Antares' back itched then, as if in memory of the times when Bella had practically soused his back in it. He rolled the small, rounded thing in his hand, and wondered absently how you'd go about juggling some of these without breaking any of them.

Then he spotted Pomfrey watching him carefully, and wanted to slap himself.

"Er – sorry," Antares said, holding out the vial to her. "My – I remember them, from when I was young." Hopefully she didn't think he wanted to...steal it, or something, though he couldn't see why she'd think something like –

"Really," Pomfrey said dryly, floating the vial out of his hands and over to one of the counters with a wave of her wand. "I take it you were an active child?"

"Not really," Antares lied, but Pomfrey seemed to no longer be listening. She headed straight for a small, dark wooden desk that stood next to one of the larger, longer counters, and drew out some paper and a quill. "Um – how long –"

"Five minutes should be more than enough," Pomfrey said immediately. "In ten minutes, you two can go."

“Thanks, Madame Pomfrey,” Blaise said, sounding mightily relieved as Antares half stumbled, half rolled on the bed. “Just stay on the bed, Antares –”

“I’m fine,” Antares grumbled, but he sat back down anyway. “Really, Blaise, she said five minutes –”

“Stay down or I’ll hold you down,” Blaise said crossly, in a way that indicated that he actually might. Antares rolled his eyes, but stayed put; the last thing he wanted was to make a scene here, while Pomfrey was still bustling about and quite obviously keeping an eye on the both of them. “Is the pain going down?”

“Yeah,” Antares said, unsteadily. His head was spinning now, and he felt dizzy, as if he’d spun in one spot and sat down suddenly. “I – um –”

“Dizziness starting to come on?” Pomfrey asked, from over by her desk. “That’s why I told you to sit down; the potion can be quite unsettling when taken for the first time, so...” She waved the small roll of parchment she’d just written on over into a half-empty scroll holder, and rose to her feet. “The dizziness will probably return for a minute or two just before you sleep, considering how long it’s lasted now –”

Antares blinked, but the dizzy feeling remained. “But I didn’t –”

“I’m a mediwitch, Mr. Black,” Pomfrey said wryly, now checking something on a board over her desk. “It’s my business to know these things.” She checked her watch. “Well, if you’re still dizzy, I suppose there’s no point in waiting longer – it’ll reduce once you stand, and fade away during breakfast. Which you should make sure to eat.”

“Yes, Madame Pomfrey,” Antares muttered, wishing that he didn’t need Blaise’s hand up quite as much. As it was, he was still a bit dizzy by the time they’d got to the staircase, and trying not to be sick from how unsteady everything looked around him. The staircase was moving, which made things worse, but by the time he and Blaise had got to the ground floor, the dizziness was all but gone, and Antares steps only wobbled a little.

“Are we going to the Great Hall already?” Antares asked. “Breakfast’s only just started, you know, and we’ll need our bags for lessons.”

“Best get it over with right now,” Blaise said, steering him away from the next staircase, which would take them down to the dungeons. “If we’re quick, we can get our bags before the first lesson and have time to spare.” He gave Antares a grin. “And there’ll still be French toast – there’s never any left when we come down...”

It was actually quite nice, eating an early breakfast. The Hall was close to empty, and those students that were there were mostly older years with big books propped up against whatever was nearest to hand. Few of them looked up at he and Blaise’s arrival, and even fewer of them looked at him for more than a minute before turning their attention back to their books. It was glorious.

Blaise didn’t even bother looking round to assess the people at breakfast. He was far too immersed in picking pieces of the fragrant, steaming French toast that were (in his opinion) the right size and right colour, and, after that, getting hold of the nicest-tasting pumpkin juice. Antares watched him for a few moments, amused, then set to getting his hands on some of the toast. It was easy, now, to push away the morbid thought of what on earth Snape, conspicuously absent from the staff table, might be saying to the first years about Antares.

It wasn’t as easy to watch Blaise eat out of the corner of his eye and try to stop himself wondering what he would make of Bella’s French toast – usually exquisite when she had the time – or even to stop thinking how amused his mother would be to see Blaise and Tracey argue over chess. Or to push away the thought of them all playing chess together at Spinner’s End on the almost suspiciously soft carpet in the sitting room. Antares tried not to frown, but couldn’t help it – it was just something that was never going to happen, what with the *Prophet’s* ravings about Bella being involved in numerous year-old murders and the last big illegal blood rite. Which she obviously hadn’t been seen or caught at. But then, there was the Prophet for you –

A cheer went up from over by the Gryffindor table, interrupting Antares' somewhat miserable train of thought so that he looked up, wondering what on earth – ah. He rolled his eyes at the spectacle of Neville Lupin being patted on the back and jostled into a seat at the middle of the Gryffindor table along with Ronald Weasley.

Blaise snorted opposite him, stabbing irritably into the wad of toast he'd just amassed. "Wonder what *he's* done now," he muttered resentfully. "S'not like they even have extra points this morning –"

"There you are!" Tracey's relieved voice interrupted Blaise mid-mutter, and soon after she was jostling Antares as she slid onto the bench beside him. "Ooh, French toast! Blaise, can I –"

"No," Blaise said immediately, twitching his dwindled pile of carefully selected toast out of her grasp. "Choose your own."

"But you've got all the best ones!" Tracey said pleadingly, reaching out to poke one slice as if in demonstration. "None of the other ones are as nice as yours..."

Blaise just rolled his eyes, batting Tracey's insistent hand away. "Sucks to be you, then," he said, snagging another slice of toast for himself. Antares, done with his own small pile of toast, decided to get in some cereal as well. Tracey glared at Blaise for a bit, then busied herself with picking at the greatly diminished platter of toast that he had plundered.

For a few moments, there was nothing but the scrape-slide of cutlery and the heavy thump of the milk jug Antares had just splashed his cereal with, and then, sure enough, Tracey struck, snatching three prime bits of toast from Blaise's plate before he could fend her off.

"Tracey, you cow!"

"It's not like you can eat every single one, you greedy prat," Tracey said crossly, now tearing her booty into regular little pieces, as always. Antares sighed inwardly. Of course, that would mean –

"At least I'm not tearing them into stupid little triangles!" – that Blaise would probably insult her for it. Blaise huffed sarcastically, pulling his

plate closer to him with a light scowl on his face. "Did I miss something this morning, Trace? Few screws loose –"

"I'm not the one guarding my toast with two forks instead of eating it like a normal person," Tracey said, giving Blaise's angry fingers a scornful poke with one of her own forks. Blaise gave a pained yell at that, but simply started trying to jab back at her, knocking bits of his precious toast here and there. Antares tried hard not to laugh out loud; it was just so –

"Look, Greg, just like Professor Snape said – barbarians, the lot of them," said Draco from behind them, sounding uncommonly gleeful. "I'd stay away from Black if I were you, Zabini – he's so filthy it's already rubbing off on you."

"Better stay on his good side, too," Vince added from just beside Draco, with a nasty smile. "We all know what'll happen if you don't..." He exchanged a grin with Greg, and chorused with him at the same time: "Mummy'll get you!"

Antares rolled his eyes, searching inwardly for something to say to such a stupid taunt. It hit him in the next instant, just as Draco had grinned and leaned forward to continue the whole thing – "I highly doubt she'd need to come all the way to 'get' anyone – eh, Blaise?"

"Nope," Blaise said immediately. He leaned forward, his tone mockingly eager. "Don't tell anyone, but Antares' mum can travel through *stone*!"

"She uses air to strangle people from hundreds of miles away," Tracey added eagerly, not willing to be left out. "She nearly did for my mum this summer for saying she was poor!"

Now, Vince and Greg looked a little apprehensive. "You're all lying, no one can do that," Greg insisted. "Can they, Draco?"

"Of course not," he said, sitting down a little way away. "I'm sure Antares *wishes* she could – ow!" Vince and Greg jumped, and Tracey looked startled at how Draco was frantically rubbing his arm. Antares forced his expression to remain surprised as he let off another Stinging Hex under the table in Draco's direction. "What the – ow!"

Blaise caught on first, having spotted Antares' wand after a minute or two of confusion. "What's that, Antares? Your mum again?"

"You know how she is, Blaise," Antares said, sighing exaggeratedly. "Can't stand being made fun of –"

"You did that, didn't you?" Draco said, having caught on as well. Antares gave him an innocent smile, ready to fire again. "You stupid wank – ow!"

"Suppose she doesn't like people being rude to him either," Tracey said, grinning. "Best watch that temper, Draco –"

Draco didn't seem to find that half as funny, fishing his wand out of a pocket instead, a determined look on his face. "I'll show you temper, you filthy half-blood –"

"Oi – take that back," Antares said, in an injured tone. "Don't you read the *Prophet*? I'm half Lestrangle and half Black, and they're certainly not –"

"Ten points for disrupting breakfast, Black," someone said from behind him. As Antares turned in his seat to see who it was, something shoved him, making him spill the contents of his cereal bowl all over the table, and nearly into his and Tracey's laps. Antares' heart sank as he turned to see that the person that had spoken was none other than one of the bastards that had beaten him up last night, now sporting an ominously glinting Prefect's Badge. Sure enough, the emeralds in the mostly full Slytherin hourglass began to recede into its upper bulb, each one adding to the rapidly growing lump in Antares' throat.

"Enjoy last night?" the prefect said, a simply nasty smile on her face. "I'm sure you did. You probably get more of the same at home." Draco sniggered, as did Vince and Greg and – if Antares heard rightly – *Ted*. And him with that reportedly violent crazy of a father, he had the guts to – "So, Black – what does Mummy do when you've been a naughty boy?"

Embarrassment surged through Antares as that set other people snickering around him.

I don't have to listen to this, he told himself. *I can bloody well leave –*

Even then, it took a lot to wipe the smears of milk off his robe sleeve and slam down his spoon. It was horrible, like everyone was watching his every move, just waiting for him to screw up. As Antares stood up, the prefect put a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Where d’you think you’re going? I’m far from finished with you –”

Antares tried to wrench his shoulder from her grip. “Leave me –”

“Only way *that* happens is if your mum gets my dad out of Azkaban,” the prefect snapped, pulling him closer despite his struggles. “Since she’s a cowardly, sneaking traitor, I highly doubt that’s going to happen.” Antares bit his lip and tried to twist away her, but her wand jabbed hard into his side, and that quickly stilled him. If no one had interfered yet, he now doubted they would do anything if she started cursing him – “Just because you’re some pissy little apprentice here doesn’t mean you’re not as scummy as she is, and I’ll eat my own bloody wand before I let you forget it –”

“Hands off my Seeker, Rookwood,” Flint said suddenly, from halfway down the table. Rookwood’s hands faltered on his shoulders for a moment, allowing Antares to twist out of her grip and stumble over the bench and away from the table. “Not if you want us to win anything this year –”

“He’s never Seeker yet,” a frowning seventh year said, turning to face them with a dark look in Antares’ direction. “Is that the way you’re running the team now, Flint? Sticking scum in even before tryouts?”

“Fortunately, Yaxley, I *am* the captain, and I say hands off my Seeker.” Flint gave Antares a hard look, openly ignoring the glares of Yaxley and Rookwood. “Get while the getting’s good, you.”

Antares didn’t waste a moment, elbowing rudely through the few gawking third years between him and the doors without a backward glance. Someone was following him, he could tell, but he bloody well wasn’t going to risk looking back and hitting them with a good Jelly-Legs until he was out of sight of the stupid professors at the high table, and –

“Merlin, slow down, Antares!”

Antares slowed down immediately, relief washing over him as Blaise appeared to his right, looking rather worried.

“Don’t let what they said get to you, Antares,” Blaise said immediately. “It doesn’t –”

“Do you see me letting it get to me?” Antares snapped, giving him a glare as they passed through the double doors. “I’m fine, I just needed to –”

“Leave the Great Hall? Get away from them?” Blaise sighed. “Look, you’re not handling it –”

“Oh, I was just supposed to sit there and smile while she told me –”

“Oh for god’s sake, you idiots, buck up!” Tracey pushed between the two of them without so much as a by-your-leave, her schoolbag knocking into Antares’ side almost hard enough to hurt. “Especially you, Antares – we’ve got Potions in fifteen minutes, and you two don’t even have your bags!”

“Don’t look at me like it’s my fault –”

Tracey rolled her eyes, cutting Blaise’s injured tone off with a shake of her head. “Well maybe you should’ve been thinking about it instead of trying to tell him to shut up around Rookwood, especially since you know –”

“Come on, Antares,” Blaise said, darting around Tracey to tug at Antares’ sleeve. “If we get going, we can probably beat her to lousy old Potions anyway.”

Antares rolled his eyes, but let himself be dragged around to the stairs to the dungeons anyway – at least, until they’d gotten to the staircase. There he broke free so as to be able to wriggle around the sleepy-looking Hufflepuffs that were just emerging from the –

Antares fell down, hard, before he even quite knew that he'd been tripped. A snigger from above him had him fishing angrily for his wand even as Tracey and Blaise started to tug him to his feet.

"What's the problem, Black?" asked one of the Hufflepuffs, a snide smile on his face. "Can't stand a bit of dirt?"

His mates sniggered. "Ruddy mystery, that," one of them said, scratching his head with an exaggerated look of perplexity on his face, "Specially since he was born in it –"

"Antares, come *on*," Blaise said, a little desperately, his grip tightening on Antares' arm. In a moment, him and Tracey were forcing Antares down the stairs. "Buck up, or we'll be late –"

"There something you want to say, Black?" the first Hufflepuff called after them, voice shaky with laughter. "Oh, come on, you know you want to –"

"Oh fuck off to class, you lazy wankers!" Tracey burst out, letting go of Antares' arm with a convulsive little jerk. "Bloody idiots – no wonder they're always bottom in everything –"

The Hufflepuffs just laughed harder, one of them stopping to make a rude face at Tracey. "Looks like you've got a girlfriend, Black! And she's got quite the temper –"

Antares gritted his teeth, wishing dearly that Quirrell had bothered to teach him a spell for hitting someone in stomach from a distance. "If one more person calls someone my girlfriend, I swear to god –"

"Antares, for Merlin's sake – Tracey! Weren't you supposed to be getting to Potions?" Blaise let go of Antares immediately, choosing to focus his attention on hauling the muttering Tracey away from the stairs. "Come on, you – Antares? Get our bags, will you?"

"So now I'm your fucking errand boy, is that it?"

"I'm going, I'm going!" Tracey snapped, wrenching free from Blaise's hold. "Antares needs watching more than I do –"

“Excuse me?” Antares snapped, glaring at her as she sullenly pretended to dust her arm off. Blaise scowled at her for a minute, then latched onto him again. “Get off –”

“Just come on, all right?” Blaise said pleadingly, half-dragging, half pushing him towards the left fork in the current corridor, which would take them to Slytherin. “Oh, fine, be like that! I’ll probably beat you there anyway...”

“Yeah, right,” Antares muttered, refusing to do more than walk. Well, until he remembered that being late to Potions would be just like handing Snape an excuse to insult him all class on a golden platter. Then he ran, ignoring Blaise’s snigger as he passed him, because he just didn’t feel like thinking about it. By the time he’d gotten to the hidden door, though, he was starting to remember –if against his will – just how loud Rookwood had been in the Great Hall, and just how many people had given him sideways looks as he struggled to leave. Which made him think of how there had been three bloody professors at the high table, and how they’d just gone on eating while Flint and that Yackley or Yaxley argued about whether Antares could get sat on some more or not.

Swearing, Antares kicked the wall, ignoring the way Blaise tried to make a big fuss about him being too fast for his own good.

“You’re not even out of breath, you wanker –”

“Can we just get on?” When Blaise didn’t quite answer, Antares turned his attention to the entrance to Slytherin. “Re – oh fuck –”

“*Recte nunquam est*,” Blaise said quietly, giving him a look of concern. Antares ignored it, focusing instead of the smooth slide of the door. Once they were through and inside their dorm without any hassle, he stifled the urge to just *Accio* everything he needed, and instead opened his trunk and began to search out what he would need for the first class of the day –Potions.

Antares grimaced at the thought of having to face the fake, angry Snape in Potions today. He still didn’t quite know how to feel about how Snape had helped and openly *not* helped him last night. And, from what Draco had said, how the man had insulted him in front of

Slytherin this morning, probably during the start-of-term talk that Antares and Blaise had missed because of Antares' injuries. How Potions would go – fuck that, how the whole year would go with Snape not being on his side when it counted was beyond Antares.

Especially if no one else is on my side, Antares thought grimly, cramming the last of his ingredients into his cauldron. And that, after this morning, seemed even more likely than he'd thought last night, considering how no one had even bothered –

"Antares? *Antares* –"

Antares blinked, turning to see Blaise glaring at him from not very far away. "*What?*"

Blaise gave him an irritated look, zipping his schoolbag closed with an impatient tap of his wand. "Can't you even try to listen when I'm talking to you?"

"Look, Blaise –"

But, surprisingly, Blaise cut him off with a wave. "I know you're angry, all right?" he said defensively. "Just – it's not like I was cheering Rookwood on–"

"I know that, all right? I'm just –"

"Then you can bloody well listen to me, can't you?" Blaise snapped. "You're not the only one being snubbed by everyone –"

"Being – being *snubbed*?" Antares said, hardly believing his ears. "Oh, so that's what you call it, is it?"

Blaise seemed to realise just what he'd said, going pale. "Antares, I didn't mean –"

Antares left, grabbing his bag as he went. He walked fast, ignoring Blaise's huffing behind him, and refused to say anything when Blaise caught up to him just as they were approaching the Potions classroom. A few of the other first – no, second years were already

there, most of them giving Antares wary looks as he approached them.

His desire to hit something resurfaced when he saw that Draco was there, and when he bumped into the gaping Granger, he couldn't help but lash out.

"The fuck're you looking at, Granger?"

She jerked away slightly, reddening. "I wasn't –"

"You leave her alone!" Neville Lupin was in Antares' face before Granger could stammer out any more, his thoughts bravery and fear almost overwhelming in their strength. "She didn't do anything to you, and –"

"*She's* a witch, and ten times smarter than you. I'd say Granger didn't need the help of –" here Antares deliberately pinched Neville on his rounded arm, "– the Tubby who lived."

Neville reddened, swatting his hand away as Pansy and Daphne snickered in the background. "Leave off my arm, you –"

"Leave off shoving your fat face into other people's business, and we'll see about that," Antares spat, ignoring the way Blaise was pulling irritatingly at his arm. "Blaise, *fuck* off –"

"Do shut that filthy mouth, Black," a horribly familiar voice said from behind. "Despite what your mother must have taught you, Hogwarts is not a pub, and this hallway is not a street!" Snape's hand dug painfully into Antares' shoulder, forcing him to turn abruptly. "Unless, of course," Snape said slowly, his tone becoming even more dangerous, "you...disagree?"

"No, sir," Antares got out quickly, trying not to fidget under the press of Snape's cold eyes and colder sneer. In the next moment, the professor had let go of him, and was flicking the door to the classroom open with a disgusted look on his face, as if touching Antares had somehow –

"Have you all lost your wits? Places, now!"

And then Antares had no real chance to think for the next ten or twenty minutes, being jostled every which way by the Gryffindors that mysteriously chose to shove past him on the way to their desks. By the time that was over, Snape had begun to insult people. Each slur made Antares feel more apprehensive – if the man was being that horrible to the other students, what would happen when he noticed Antares again?

Antares scowled at the thought, knowing that it was unlikely that Snape would forget to insult him today, considering the almost too convincing act he'd already put up so far. And, sure enough:

"Disgusting execution, Black. *Pretend* those lilies have no need of torture, I beg you."

"Did you leave your brain in Slytherin this morning, boy? Focus!"

"Is that *nightshade* you're adding, Black?" Snape's tone, now, was almost as low and dangerous as it had been at dinner last night. It made Antares' slightly shaking hand shake harder, which shook some of the roughly chopped nightshade into his cauldron. "Oh splendid, Black – I do believe I've the honour of overseeing your first detention this term."

Antares nearly put his hand in the potion out of shock. "B-but –"

"When I ask a question of you, boy, I expect an answer. And instead of answering my question, you ignored – *deliberately* ignored –"

"I was at a critical stage!" Antares protested, biting his lip as he continued to sloppily sprinkle the nightshade into the potion despite Snape's glare. "You said we shouldn't pause when adding nightshade, so I didn't..."

But Snape's eyes were gleaming with what Antares did not quite want to believe was triumph. "Are you interrupting me, Black?"

"Sir, I was at a *critical* –"

"*Another* question unanswered, Black? This simply won't –"

“Professor, my potion’s finished,” Antares bit out, now stirring it as quickly as he could. *If this could just be done, if it can just end, maybe he’ll –*

“Your potion,” Snape said poisonously, “is *inadequate*.” His hand shot out, knocking Antares’ mechanically stirring hand from the stirring rod so that the potion, which needed only two or three more stirs to be done, turned an unpleasant, sickly green. “Your potion,” Snape continued viciously, “hardly merits a mark – I can see that from here.” He tapped the stirring rod sharply with his wand, peering briefly inside the cauldron, a grim smile on his lips. “Useless, as I supposed. Detention.”

What the – two detentions? Two? Antares knew he would sound plaintive and silly, but couldn’t stop the words from coming out. “But you just knocked my –”

“And a third, for daring to imply I would stoop to sabotaging your wretched potion,” Snape said smoothly, eyes gleaming. “A fourth for disrespect – I assure you, Black, that I allow no one to take that strident tone with me, least of all the brat son of a known criminal.” The class was deathly silent now, and all Antares could hear was the thudding in his head, the dull thud of confused resentment that dogged him even as he thought he saw what Snape was doing. “Be proud, Black – you’re well on your way to following in your illustrious uncle’s footsteps. He had detention every night of the week, as I recall. As you do now –”

“But I didn’t –”

“No,” Snape said, his grim smile becoming nasty, “you didn’t. But five is such a – such a *nice* number...”

Antares blinked furiously, now unable to feel his hands. He thought he understood – Snape was trying to keep him out of the way so those bullies couldn’t get to him, he was almost sure of that. By the time the man turned slowly away, Antares felt feverish with gratitude and disgust, disgust that Snape could even say such things about Bella, with the way he looked at her, with the way he’d all but snatched her from Antares –

The class ended, but Antares didn't quite know when. All he did was start and vaguely notice that everyone was packing up now, then follow suit. He had to bite his tongue not to say anything when Snape praised Draco's potion over and over again, or when Snape spared a bland comment for Granger's hellishly perfect one – all the while, he scrubbed the green goo out of his and wanted – wanted –

Antares dug savagely at a particularly stubborn lump, ignoring the way Tracey and Blaise were slowing down over at his left so they could wait for him. There was nothing to want. If he started thinking about this, it would get to him, which he did *not* need, especially if any other professors were half as horrible to him as Snape had been. He'd have to keep his mouth shut somehow, despite everything.

"Get out, you two," Snape said coldly, from behind him. Tracey and Blaise fled reluctantly, Tracey giving Antares a look of concern over her shoulder even as Blaise urged her out. The door shut abruptly, making Antares jump, and then there was Snape, elbowing him aside and waving his wand over his cauldron. When all the mess in it disappeared with the next wave, Antares wavered between sighing with relief and shouting at Snape.

The latter won, almost a little too easily. "A week of detention! A fucking *week* –"

"Be silent," Snape said firmly, in a way that had Antares obeying even before the professor had steered him firmly into his seat. "I could use the help, of course."

"Bastard," Antares said, but it was lower than before. "It's not fair!"

"If I cared, I would suppose you'd change your estimation of its fairness if it kept your attackers from you, at least at night," Snape said, rolling his eyes. Another wave of his wand sent Antares' scattered belongings flying to tuck themselves into the right places. "It might not work, but is the best I can do on such short notice – where do you think you are going?"

"Lunch, you miserable bastard," Antares spat. "Oh, *it might work*. Do you know how long it took me to get up to the Hospital Wing this morning?"

“Antares –”

“If that’s all you can do, I don’t want your fucking help,” Antares went on, seizing his schoolbag with trembling fingers. “I don’t – I don’t want it.” He tried not to think about what it might mean, that he was able to open the door to the classroom and lurch into the empty corridor outside.

It didn’t work, of course, and by the time Antares was halfway up the stairs to the Great Hall, he was torn between going to lunch and going back to find Snape and take it back. It didn’t help that people snickered and sneered at him all the way to the Hall – everyone seemed to notice him and react, some whispering among their friends, some glaring at him, some actually calling after him and saying things Antares instinctively tried to ignore. Shoving through the press of students to get into the Great Hall started to look like an impossible task, and when Antares was finally faced with it, he made a quick decision, turning for the stairs to the dungeons instead, hoping he wouldn’t meet Rookwood or the other bullies on his way to the kitchens. There was just no way he could face lunch in the midst of a Hogwarts that hated him right now, and that was that, even if he got beaten for his pains –

Approaching footsteps jolted Antares out of his confusion momentarily, then sunk him back in deeper. God, what had he been thinking? He turned this way and that, praying for – there, an alcove, thank Morgana – and rapidly squeezed himself into it, ignoring the scrapes he got in trying to press as far into the dark corner as he possibly could –

“...him and the Black kid, I don’t know who’s worse,” someone complained, their previously quiet words abruptly becoming louder. “Lupin’s as puffed up as anything after that stupid thing with the car –”

“Wasn’t that stupid, John,” another person said, interrupting. “That car must have been pretty high up, even if people could still spot it –”

“Please – that’s just because you’re afraid of heights...”

Antares relaxed somewhat, hearing that bizarre conversation fade off into the distance. After a minute or so of silence, he peered cautiously

out of the alcove he'd hidden in, half wishing he knew that spell Bella had used on Diagon Alley, when they'd –

Antares scowled. Bloody Lucius bloody Malfoy – why on earth did he and Draco have to ruin so many things for him and Bella? Still scowling, he left the alcove and made for the kitchens, going slowly and making sure to listen out for footsteps or voices as he went. It seemed to take forever to finally reach the portrait of fruit that was the entrance to the kitchen, probably due to how many wrong turns Antares took on the way, but he was inside in a trice, and overloaded with food from the elves ten minutes after he'd got in.

So lunch was a strange, seemingly endless meal of hot, delicious chicken pie filled with interruptions from unnervingly happy house-elves. Antares felt a little guilty leaving the kitchen with a large small slice of the sponge cake that several elves said would be the base for some sort of desert tonight, and his guilt only intensified when he realized that he was late for History of Magic. Before setting off, he made sure to sit somewhere and finish off the cake – only right, since he'd need to run up to the first floor to get to class, and he didn't want to get there with cake in his hands.

Ten breathless minutes later, Antares slipped through the ajar door and into the History of Magic classroom, thanking Merlin that Binns wasn't the sort of professor to even notice him or know he exis-

“Late again, Potter,” Binns said, his droning voice a little sharper than usual. “Following in your father's footsteps, I suppose?” When Antares, embarrassed, didn't answer, Binns sniffed. “To your seat, to your seat, boy. Potters. They're all the same – unlike the Garnagaks.” Antares rolled his eyes and, shaking his head at the old ghost's bizarre behaviour, began to make for the empty seat he spotted beside Tracey, who looked like she was about to rear out of her seat and drag him to where she sat. “As I am sure all of you know by now, the hereditary gene malfunctioned noticeably with them. The only constant with *them* was, in fact, that none of them were remotely similar in action, word, or –”

"Where have you been?" Tracey hissed, ignoring Binns' drone as Antares finally flopped into the seat next to her and Blaise. "Did Snape –"

"I went to the kitchens," Antares said, interrupting her as soon as possible. "Look –"

Tracey cut him off with an impatient noise. "But if he didn't do anything, then why –"

"Let's *not* talk about it, for once – how about that?" Antares said, giving Blaise a pointed look. "I'm sick of talking about this, for god's sake."

"Fine," Tracey said, giving him a slightly injured look. "I was just worried –"

"Well thanks, then," Antares snapped, finding it difficult to keep his voice down despite the way Pansy and Daphne were staring at them. "Look, we can talk about it later, I just –"

"You're just an irritating prig, that's what," Tracey snapped back, the squiggles she'd been drawing across her partially empty roll of parchment becoming violent. "Be that way if you like – it's not like we're the only people who give a toss."

"Tracey –"

"No talking, Potter," Binns snapped – actually snapped, this time. "How many times must I tell you? The Garnagaks never failed to understand commands, as you should –"

"Bugger the garglers," Antares spat, infuriated by it all. *Who gives a shit, anyway?* He thought, rising jerkily to his feet despite Binns numerous deranged orders to 'Potter' to sit down and shut up, unless he wanted to fail his OWLs – "Good bloody afternoon, Professor." And with that he was outside, breathing harder than anyone would after just leaving a stupid class, his bag weighing heavily on his shoulder. A moment of angry thought decided him – he'd just go to the dungeons and do some Occlumency, and Tracey and Blaise and the whole of Hogwarts could go fuck themselves.

Scowling so hard his face hurt, Antares headed for the dungeons. The corridors on the first floor were empty, as were the corridors he passed through as he descended to the dungeons, a fact he dully thanked Merlin for. This time, his journey went by all too quickly – in what seemed like no time, he was sliding his tatty schoolbag off his shoulder and dropping into one of the rickety chairs he'd helped scrounge for the room last year, and trying to understand how things could have changed so quickly.

Honestly, though – at the beginning of today, he'd had two friends. Now –

Antares violently suppressed that thought, and so started a short, yet brutal Occlumency practice. It went frighteningly well – came of really not wanting to think about half the things he resolutely folded away – and was done and finished with in less time than he'd thought.

“Tempus – wow.” Only just five – so supper's still at least an hour off. Antares lowered his wand slowly, sighing. After that little argument in History, it was highly unlikely that Tracey would bother looking for him, or that she or Blaise would even suggest it instead of going off to Slytherin without –

There's got to be something else to do here, Antares told himself, absently pocketing his wand. It slid halfway into his robe pocket, but no further, puzzling him. In a trice, he'd pulled it out and shoved a hand into the pocket to see – *oh. That.*

The tatty old diary needed to be wrenched out of the pocket, from being squashed in so. Antares, examining it curiously, didn't wonder long why he'd left it in there – he usually stuck his wand up his sleeve, or in a different pocket, and today hadn't been a day for methodically emptying a robe before he sleepily crawled into it.

Shrugging, Antares sat down, diary in hand. Wishing for an actual table to put it on so he could – well, look through it better, although there was nothing to look through – he opened it slowly and turned to today's date, wondering if the weird sinking thing would still happen if he wrote in it. A moment later, he'd retrieved a battered Self-Inking quill from his bag, and was eyeing the diary with a smidgen of anticipation.

Well, Antares thought, here goes nothing.

Hello, he wrote slowly. *Anyone in there?* A moment passed as the words dried slowly on the page. Then, little by little, began to sink into the thin page in the same way they had when Antares and Adrian had –

Oh, appeared in their stead, in a much neater hand than Antares thought he could ever aspire to. *You again.*

Antares blinked in surprise, then supposed that it wasn't such a long time ago since he'd wrestled the diary from Adrian's hands and drawn that silly tree in it. Just because that felt like weeks ago didn't mean the diary wouldn't remember, especially since it was so old. Antares twirled the quill once, then wrote on.

Suppose it's no surprise that you remember my handwriting, he wrote slowly, trying hard to make sure his words were in a straight line. It was always so difficult keeping them level on unlined paper. If there was a time he'd really missed something about primary school, it had been when he'd realised that he was going to have to write on blank, unlined parchment *every day*. Sighing, Antares went on. *You can't have been written in for ages, I think. Are you a very old diary? You certainly look it –*

Antares blinked, pausing as his words abruptly disappeared, only to be replaced by five words.

I am NOT a diary. Antares stared – the handwriting of the diary was so much shakier now, so much that it looked a little like his own when he was trying very hard to be neat – *Not just a diary, anyway,* the diary continued, these words looking a little less shaky. *I'm a boy, and my name is Tom.*

Antares' momentary amusement at the huffy tone of the first two sentences vanished abruptly as he saw the last one. From his (limited) experience with magical objects, only the oldest and most heavily used ones even thought of bothering to assign themselves names. He wasn't sure why that happened, either, as Bella had never really explained about the few objects that named themselves voluntarily except to say that it wasn't normal. But she'd said enough

for him to know that the diary shouldn't think it had a name. It was *empty*, for Merlin's sake...though that probably didn't tell him anything, if it had the tendency to absorb conversations like it had just been doing –

What is your name? the diary prompted. Absently, Antares scrawled a quick answer under the question, then wanted to hit himself as the two words shimmered a little, but stayed put. He'd written his surname automatically, for fucking – you'd think that after all that had happened, he'd know not to – *Really? I used to know a Black in school.*

In school? It was all Antares could do to momentarily stop himself from writing that immediately, especially since the diary could easily have been angling for such a response. This was getting stranger by the minute, though, especially considering the fact that the perhaps not so confused diary thought it was a boy, and knew it had been to school. Antares could grudgingly imagine some poor street boy getting roped unwillingly into dark magic and somehow ending up with half his soul essence in a diary, but for it to happen to someone who'd gone to Hogwarts? With, Antares thought enviously, handwriting as good as that? It didn't make sense –

So, he'd answer it. If the – if the boy-diary-*thing* wanted him to ask, maybe it wanted to tell him.

In school? he wrote slowly, trying not to fidget. *What school did you go to?* Though that was a daft question, since everyone knew Hogwarts was the only wizarding school in Britain. The boy didn't seem to be writing in French or something else, so that ruled out the other schools on the continent –

Hogwarts, the boy replied. *And you?*

Same, Antares scribbled quickly, fidgeting with wary excitement. It was a bad idea, probably, but the diary couldn't just have thrown out the thing about the Blacks without expecting to be asked about it either. Or at least that was what Antares told himself as he scribbled in his next question. *Which of the Blacks did you know?*

There was a long pause after that, long enough that Antares began to think he'd somehow offended the boy – the diary – by asking like that, instead of maybe going through more stupid small talk about their wands or Houses or whatnot. That was probably just another side effect of something wrong having happened to the boy – maybe that's why it had been abandoned in Flourish and Blott's, stuck into a used book and forgotten about like the little unhappy bookmarks he found in some of his used books once in a while, still refusing to budge from the same page they'd been set to keep to by their careless creator –

But wait, the boy was writing something under Antares' question – *I didn't know her very well, but her name was Walburga.*

Antares' eyes widened – god, wasn't that Bella's aunt's name? The one that had left money, despite everything? That had to have been ages ago, and far too long for the boy to have –

She was about a year up – pretty crotchety, the boy wrote smoothly, but really conscious of supporting family. Never let even her second cousins be bullied, though they weren't full Blacks.

Well, that sounds like a Black, Antares wrote, head buzzing with the thought of asking Bella about it, or, better still, looking up a Walburga Black in the library, and checking to see who was in the year below her – At least you didn't say she was an out and out snob. My mum used to call her that.

Well, the boy wrote back slowly, I daresay she was right. Very concerned for her family, was Walburga – and for no one else.

Grinning, Antares turned the page. So, he wrote, *who else did you know?*

It was a long while before Antares could stop smiling, after closing the diary and tucking it away as he hurried to go to dinner. He felt hugely bolstered by the fact that Tom – the boy in the diary, that is, had known Professor McGonagall as a first year, and that everyone had thought her the most disobedient troublemaker that Hogwarts had ever seen. Even more pleasing was the knowledge that Abraxas Malfoy – Draco's grandfather, apparently – had been absolutely pitiful

on a broom. Antares wasn't quite sure how to work that sort of an insult into his next spiteful conversation with Draco, but he'd be quite happy to settle for watching him fumble moves in the air during Quidditch tryouts and wondering sarcastically when the Quidditch genius was going to show up, and knowing that, on his family alone, Draco *wasn't* one, and probably wouldn't ever be –

“Speak of the devil,” Blaise muttered irritably as Antares slipped jauntily into the space next to him.

“And shall he appear,” Antares said companionably, reaching for the mouth-watering bowl of soup that was right in front of Tracey, who was almost glaring at him. “What? My mum always says that, and no one –”

“Check my memory, Tracey, I think he actually heard me,” Blaise said, giving Antares a hard look. “I mean, for *that* to happen, I've got to have killed someone, or something!”

“Rookwood, by any chance?” Antares said, spooning out a steaming portion of the soup for himself. “Or – what was that arsehole's name –”

“You know, I'm starting to think I actually should,” Tracey said sharply, setting down her fork with an irritated look on his face. “Maybe he's actually carried out that stupid threat and removed the memory of it, or –”

“Nah. But we do need to practice it sometime,” Antares said around a mouthful of soup. He turned to the left, having decided to make a test of Tom's words, and found Draco glaring at him as usual. “Is your grandfather's name Abraxas, by any chance?”

“Black, why don't you just –”

“Use your brain, Draco, it's a yes-or-no question,” Antares said sarcastically. “Ah, fuck it, shouldn't have bothered.” He sighed and turned away, and had only thought of reaching for the nearby basket of rolls when Draco cracked.

“Just because your family sucks doesn’t mean you can stalk mine,” Draco said snootily. He gave Antares a prim smile. “We don’t take in trash, thanks.”

“But you fly like it, don’t you?” Antares grinned, turning towards Draco again. “Simple problem, isn’t it? Your father was on the Quidditch team, but it actually lost more than it won, then. And your dear old grandfather certainly didn’t win any House Cups –”

“You take that –”

“Which, given your talent, leaves me a bit curious as to how on earth you think you’re getting on the Quidditch team this year,” Antares went on, relishing how red Draco was going. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever asked you –”

“Black, I’m warning you –”

“– which position you’re trying out for.” Antares grinned. “Tell me it’s not Seeker, and I’ll be quiet.”

Draco spluttered, and darkened a shade further, and Antares was hard pressed to not combust with suppressed laughter. “Go on, Draco, you can do it. You’ll probably be reserve Chaser if you try out for it, true, but reserve isn’t such a bad thing, is it?” Antares smiled tightly. “Probably what you’d get, if you tried out for Seeker.”

“The only reason you fly so well,” Draco said, through gritted teeth, “is because your mum fucked herself with a broom while she was still pregnant with you.”

Antares didn’t even wince, hard as it was. It was more than easy to smile nastily at Draco, now. “All comes down to family, doesn’t it?” Antares said simply, into the tense silence around them. “Guess *you* won’t be trying out for Seeker. Your mum was probably too tired to fuck any more brooms, to get past just how bad dear old Granddad –”

Draco, cursing, went for his wand, and that was when it all went to pot.

“Ah, Mr. Black – making a nuisance of yourself again?” Snape’s voice was smooth and poisonous behind them, and the grip with which he dragged Antares to his feet was iron. “I don’t suppose that week of detentions is quite enough to stop your sorry tongue. Perhaps two, instead.”

Several people snickered as Snape let Antares go, ensuring he’d stumble over the bench as the smirking bastard motioned him on, the look in his eyes so malevolent that Antares refused to think of even trying to retaliate. Snape caught hold of his arm as soon as he was free of the bench and shoved him forward, obviously meaning to begin the detention as soon as possible, and Antares just managed to stay on his feet, despite the few legs and arms that got mysteriously in his way on the way out of the Hall.

Whispers and giggles, though partially silenced by Snape’s glowering presence, followed them all the way to the dungeons. Antares was hot in the face with shame, and shaky with anger and the same sort of drowning humiliation he’d thought he’d had just about enough of earlier on – Snape pushed him into the dungeons without a word, and pointed him to a stack of dirty cauldrons over by the sinks and just left, as if Antares deserved to be there, when –

“Fuck it. *Sano* –”

“You will give your wand to me,” Snape’s voice said, startling him. Antares could only watch as the complete, utter bastard actually came out from his stupid office and took the wand from his hand without so much as a – “That little – that stupid display was the most foolish thing you’ve done all day. And that *is* saying something.”

“Excuse me?”

“If I find you absent from lunch without due cause again, I will see that a house elf is assigned to search you out and drag you into the Great Hall,” Snape snapped, giving Antares a furious look. “Do you know how cowardly it looks, missing meals just because of a few –”

“Maybe you should just let me get this done,” Antares said, interrupting quietly, his tone pointedly calm. When Snape glared at him, seemingly speechless with fury, he turned and began to look for

cleaning supplies. Eventually, Snape stopped fuming over behind him and left for his office again – not Antares much cared by now. Every blob of grease and slimy potion became Snape's face in his mind, and the diary felt heavy in his pocket.

"I do this only for your own good, you wretched boy," Snape had muttered just as he left, obviously not quietly enough, as he didn't wait for an answer.

Well, Antares thought, my finding out about your parents will only be for my own good, you cold-hearted, mean old sod. I just bet Tom knows about them – he knows everything.

The detention wasn't quite as tedious then – not with Antares imagining several conversations between him and Snape, largely involving him telling Snape that he was uglier than even his mother, and that that was saying something. And when Antares left, he headed straight for the Occlumency dungeon, and settled right in with the diary almost as soon as he'd locked the door and sat down.

I don't suppose you could tell me if you ever knew a Snape...?

The boy only took a moment to answer. *Snape? Never heard of any. Why'd you ask?*

Antares felt faint with too many things to write very well, but he wrote something just the same. *Just curious. Are you sure?*

Why would I lie to you?

Oh, I don't know, Antares thought wryly, rolling his eyes, *why not?* But he didn't write that, asking absently about Flitwick instead. Tom gave him an almost exhaustive description of the professor, and how there had been scandals about the mercenary way he duelled – something Antares didn't quite believe just yet – and seemed very surprised to find he was actually a Hogwarts professor now. But all the while, Antares thought quietly about the fact that Tom, who seemed to know more than Snape probably did about the Blacks and Malfoys and other pureblood families, did not know Snape's family. And what that could, and probably did mean.

Smiling grimly, Antares wondered what Bella would do if she knew. Just because she'd given up many of her prejudices didn't mean she'd stopped thinking purebloods were better than anything. And if Snape wasn't a known line, then that left only one conclusion. The only thing Antares wasn't sure of was whether he should tell Bella sooner or later, or – nicely unlikely – whether she already knew.

Well, Antares thought, finally closing the diary, I'll just have to find out, won't I?

A/N: Jesus Christ, but I'm sorry this took so long. Blame Lois Bujold's Vorkosgian books and Firefly, and you've successfully shamed two of my major distractions over the past couple days. Then you can go on to blame my school and exams and projects and all the rest of them to get the other offenders.

This was quite the talky chapter, wasn't it? Hopefully you enjoyed the ride nevertheless. Anyway, the next chapter is from Snape's POV, and will have Lucius in it at some point. And will be out in two weeks, if I have to kill myself to do it.

Chapter 7: Three Meetings

Severus shrugged on his outer robe with a curse under his breath. Somehow, the sleepy murmur of Bella in his bed increased the indignity of being forced back onto this path. It seemed alien and familiar all at once; pressing a slow kiss to her cheek and relishing her smile, then turning to check for the fifth time that his left sleeve would roll up quickly and efficiently. Twisting halfway out of his outer robe, he rolled his shirtsleeve up to his elbow with a few smooth motions and lifted his chin almost unconsciously, as if presenting to some ghost Lucius.

Snorting, Severus rolled down his sleeve and slid his left arm back into the robe. It was definitely a remove-the-whole-robe gesture, then – he couldn't imagine how silly he'd look, dangling his robe off one shoulder and flashing his slightly darkened Mark in Lucius' face. Of course, strictly speaking, revealing the Dark Mark in a similar way was certain to be ostentatious (or, as Bella had repeatedly put it, ridiculous); there was only so much he could do to make it look valid.

Severus let a half-smile rise briefly to his face. Validity certainly wouldn't be a problem, since Lucius had persisted in keeping that ridiculous concealment act in force. *I wonder how long it's been since he actually looked at it*, he mused, fingers tugging absently at his sleeve.

The half-smile dwindled. *How long has it been?* Severus found himself asking. Not of Lucius, unfortunately – of himself. It only took a moment to shove up the robe sleeve and wrestle open his shirtsleeve, and – there.

There. As always, Severus could not help touching it, wondering why such a simple thing could cause such pain. That was a stupid question, of course, but still. It was a luxury to wonder, and he would give that to himself, at least. Especially now, with the familiar ritual of manipulation swinging into play. Touching the Mark, now, felt like touching the past – the old, hungry past.

Severus rolled down his sleeve with a grimace. Resurrecting that old part of him – those old, faintly forgotten parts of him – would be easy. Too easy, perhaps. Easy enough to lose him this round of things?

Perhaps.

Apparating cleared his head, but not his fear. Severus bit his lip as he surveyed the darkness around him – *ah, that park* – but could not quite bring himself to make the next jump to Malfoy Manor. The next place he found himself in was familiar – another park – and that somehow soothed his fear. Severus straightened, remembering now that he could deal with his yearning for recognition, and could certainly deal with the remnants of that old grasping for status. He remembered this second park, clearly – that bush there, that tree there. He remembered deciding, here, that he would not be cowed.

Severus took a deep breath. This meeting with Lucius would go as planned, he knew, despite the fear still clouding his mind. Lucius had the most to lose, now, if the Dark Lord truly made a triumphant, public return, and caught him with that foolish, glamoured plaster over his arm. And, by the end of this meeting, if not before, Severus would make sure he knew, with perverse satisfaction in the doing.

Well. No time like the present...

The cold bit into his bare hands as always, taunting the way he always forgot warming charms when he might need them most. Malfoy Manor, tonight, was dull in the distance; entirely without the light and activity that had filled it on Severus' last visit. Draco's twelfth birthday party, perhaps? No, actually, the eleventh; Severus remembered expounding to Bella on the irony of being excluded from the one Malfoy event they invited *everyone* to.

Severus smiled grimly. He'd almost forgotten that, before now – well, more fuel was always welcome to the fire, new-sprung and of new focus since that first moment Severus had seen Bella scan that first day's headlines.

The smile disappeared long before Severus encountered even one obsequious house elf, and in the place of Severus was Professor Snape, tired from that dreary potions conference the day before, frozenly polite as always. To pass the time while Lucius almost all too obviously made him wait in one of the myriad antechambers the stupid Manor possessed, Severus examined himself dispassionately in a splendid mirror on the opposite wall, and marvelled privately at

the length Lucius must have gone to choose such an obnoxiously forthright one. The next thought that occurred, of course, was how Lucius had decided to have Severus steered to *this* room in particular, and was the one that followed his stiff stride after the house elf when it returned for him some minutes later.

Soon, Severus was coolly shaking hands with his former friend, and examining him just as sharply as he himself was surely being scrutinised. Lucius looked calm, as always. A week ago, that calm, composed look would have fooled Severus.

“Oh, I’m not troubled at all – I used the time to shed some of the exhaustion from the convention.”

“Well, splendid!” Severus mirrored a thin version of Lucius’ pleasant smile back at him, wishing he could gather up the venom he planned to slip through the cracks of the man and spit it in his face, all at once, just to break that irritating, pleasantly calm expression on Lucius’ face. Severus knew, from the slight squint and the way Lucius skilfully avoided looking him directly in the eye, that he was nervous. Yet, he still wished, irritably, that he could actually see more signs pointing to the fearful heart that lay beneath his former friend’s cool exterior.

It was no surprise, therefore, that one reason Severus had even considered joining the Dark Lord was his almost reliable ability to unnerve Lucius Malfoy. The way Lucius could shake, too, in their Lord’s presence, had been Severus’ small comfort in a time where there were few other to hand, and now he could not help wishing to somehow superimpose the wild-eyed Luciuses of before upon this cool, calm man.

“Sit down, sit down,” Lucius said pleasantly, as they were ushered into a small, cosy drawing room Severus faintly remembered from days gone by, thereby revealing the first chink in his armour: desire to start the conversation. “Dobby, wait, for god’s sake. Will you have anything, Severus?”

Severus sighed and shook his head slightly, settling easily into what looked to be the least comfortable chair. Lucius feigned indecision, then ordered his usual glass of obscure, undoubtedly excellent

champagne, and did not break the silence that ensued once the house elf's squeals were gone.

"So, then," Lucius said, disinterestedly, walking over to the window. "I hear that Hogwarts is quite the exciting place these days."

"You wouldn't be far wrong, for this last week," Severus replied. "I suppose you heard of those novel pranks on the upper years from your son...?"

Lucius smiled faintly. "Yes, yes – did blood truly feature?" When Severus nodded, Lucius' smile widened. "Goodness. How extreme."

"Even so," Severus said, shrugging. "Masterful execution, for such a crude prank, down to the spell used." Summoning an empty glass out of thin air, Severus casually filled it with water and began to sip, ignoring Lucius' faint sneer. "*Caligo*, I believe – when the house elves were done with the bedding, they insisted that only a glassful or two of real blood was used." Actually, Severus had stood over them and terrorized them into giving an estimate once he'd found the bloodstained sheets had been sent to them instead of to him to analyze. From the way Lucius glanced at him, Severus assumed that he would guess something similar.

Which was fine. Lucius would probably have done the same.

"That does intrigue – *Caligo* at Hogwarts? Under Dumbledore's canny old nose?" Lucius, obviously having given up on trying to unnerve Severus with the height difference, threaded his way to a seat almost opposite him. "Has he begun to accuse Slytherins yet?"

"Oh, I went ahead and begun accusing them myself," Severus said, his tone almost airy. He cleared his throat, trying not to savour Lucius' fleeting look of consternation. "I've never seen the point in protecting children that don't know to cover their tracks."

"Ah," Lucius said, calm again, externally – Severus took pleasure in taking another sip from his glass before answering the inherent question – "What do you mean, cover their tracks?"

Severus' iron – well, in this case – self control failed momentarily, and he almost smiled. “A simple spell could have set the blood to degrade, or set that spreading spell to fail. The second choice would have been particularly amusing, since the prank was played in the seventh year girls' dormitory.” Severus took another sip of his drink, enjoying how Lucius' lips thinned as the pause lengthened. “No Slytherin with a hint of sense would have gone through with that prank without thinking of a way to make it go undiscovered. Therefore, if one of my current Slytherins is so without sense, I will have no qualms in hunting him out and handing him to Dumbledore so,” Severus Banished the near-empty glass, “justice may be done.”

“But the crime, as it were, is still one that cannot be traced back to the perpetrator,” Lucius said, wonderingly. “The blood used –”

“But the cockerel was killed before its exsanguination,” Severus pointed out. “That, in itself, eliminates several of the younger years with grudges against anyone in the seventh year girls' dorm. As does their choice of victim – the use of such heavy-handed nonsense against Gwen Mulciber simply baffles me, as I am hard pressed to think of someone she could have offended so violently. If anything, I would have thought the prankster would target Andrew's daughter instead.”

“You mean Wilhemina?”

“Exactly. Ringleader of a thousand schemes, and as like to offend someone as to put on her shoes? And even then, the only explanation for the prank that would make sense to me is if she did it herself.”

“I imagine she didn't take too kindly to hearing that.”

“As smart as she is, I think she'll remain a brat well into her old age.” Severus said, snorting and shifting slightly in his chair. “Involve the Ministry, indeed.”

“So your justice does not include such drastic measures,” Lucius prompted, looking momentarily satisfied.

"Of course not," Severus said simply. "It was only a prank – a tasteless, heavy-handed one, to be sure, but only a prank. The most Dumbledore will do is express his disappointment, perhaps ban the perpetrator from visiting Hogsmeade and the chicken pen, and watch the young fool like a hawk till they leave Hogwarts." He sighed. "All in all, something appropriate to make the little idiot cry and be sensible for the rest of the year – or, at least, until I can dig up some old law that will let me kick her out of my house."

Lucius smiled. "Still as arbitrary as ever."

Severus gave him a look of mocking surprise. "What, you've given up on accusing me of being unfeeling?"

"How can I, when you just showed such depth of feeling?" Lucius said, waving his hand in a mocking gesture. "If it was for Slytherin, then all the better – you guard the old coven from shame, and that is admirable."

Severus smiled, letting his expression give it edge. "So the old accusation stands."

"But diminished, Severus," Lucius said, his tone almost earnest. "Surely that counts?" The champagne arrived in a loud – unnecessarily loud twinkle, set on a floating platter between the two men, and Severus smiled on, the activity made easy by watching Lucius' glass wobble its way into his hand. He never had been good at keeping all spells smooth when he was highly disturbed, though if one did not know him well, one would assume – "So. I didn't drag you here for unimportant gossip." Lucius sipped elegantly at his obscure champagne, and waited for his stupid hint to sink in.

"Well," Severus said, striving to keep the malice from colouring his tone, "I shall be brief, then – no doubt, you have other more important things that await your attention –" Here, he stood, shrugged off his outer robe, and rolled up his left sleeve with quick, decisive movements. "Now, as you can see –"

"*Must* you be so crude, Severus?" Lucius snapped, face paling as he saw the slightly darkened Mark. "You know, you will not advance in

life if you don't let go of this – this habit of trying to make everyone around you look stupid –”

“Nevertheless, you requested that I be brief,” Severus said calmly, now rolling down his sleeve. A lie, of course – he had planned to shock Lucius as much as possible, and such a revelation of the vulgar tattoo that had nearly put them both in Azkaban was, as ever, a sure way to do so, especially now. “The attacks on the Philosopher’s Stone last year and this summer were orchestrated by the Dark Lord, of course –”

“Of course?” Lucius’ tone began to become angry. “And you are just now deciding that I should be informed?”

“No one knew until the end of the summer term, Lucius,” Severus said tightly. “I only just decided that he was not in the country some weeks before term began –”

“And why have you not joined him?” Lucius asked, snidely. Severus gave him a hard look.

“If I have to explain that to you –”

“So you have not contacted him, then?”

For a moment, Severus fought a traitorous smile. Calm, cool – *not* smiling, that was the way to ensure this conversation went in the direction he chose. *Not* smiling. “Even if I was able, why would I?” He let the surprise surface on Lucius’ face before going on, and rejoiced at how long it took – or rather, did not take. “He left us at a key time. A *pivotal* time, Lucius. That he tried to steal the Stone is encouraging, but it leaves certain important questions unanswered. For one, how exactly did the Longbottoms destroy him, yet leave such integral portions of his soul alive? Can such an action be duplicated? If so, why should I, or you, or any of us that remain, serve a Lord so weakened?” Severus stood, putting his itch for laughter to better use by pacing jerkily. “Despite it all, my faith prevailed. I stayed in a stationary, useless position that would protect me and keep me on the path he desired for ten years. What I simply wish to know, first, is whether my efforts have been in vain. At this point, our Lord surely

knows that that is a question he must answer. Once he does, I am his.”

“And how do you suppose he will?” Lucius said, his tone strained.

“He will announce his return, with small signs or large,” Severus said decisively, unable to stop himself pausing briefly to pray fervently that that would never happen. “Once he does, I will contact him.”

“Ah,” was all Lucius said to that. Severus sat down slowly, deep satisfaction welling up in him. Small signs, indeed – with that, Lucius would feel *justified* in his paranoia, after this conversation. It was almost too delightful for words – “I see. You’ve been most helpful, Severus –”

Severus stood, despite the fact that that last sentence had almost been a plea for him to stay – *stay on, help me*, Lucius’ tone said. “It’s getting late, no doubt. It was a pleasure, as always –”

“Have you told any of the others yet?” Lucius asked, rising slowly to his feet as if that would erase the obvious desperation of not acknowledging that Severus was leaving.

“No, but I intend to fill Avery in when he comes down to answer his fool daughter’s cry for help on Thursday,” Severus said, shrugging on his outer robe. “Why – do you think I should –”

“I see no need to alarm anyone just yet, Severus,” Lucius said pointedly. “Unless there is one of those signs you spoke of. And it might be years before one surfaces...”

“I believe I see your point,” Severus said, after a meaningful pause. On closer examination of his former friend’s stiff expression, he decided not ask why Lucius thought the news of the Dark Lord’s better-than-expected health alarming. “Once a sign emerges, however –”

“Of course,” Lucius said, leaning forward to clasp Severus’ hand in a brief, yet strong grip. “Do stop by again, if you feel the need to.”

Severus smiled. The old insult, that old reminder of his not being normally welcome in this foul old house – well. It could not hurt him now. Perhaps it was time to make Lucius understand that.

“If,” Severus said, calmly, “I feel the need to.” He gave Lucius a small, negligent nod, and left the drawing room, only half conscious of the fact that one of the cringing house elves that had been outside the door followed him to the exit. Before, such a thing would have enraged him, being a solid reminder of the fact that Lucius would never acknowledge him as an equal in matters of class. A reminder that no matter what he did, he’d always be relegated to a group of those not trusted to remain unattended in the house. Now, it seemed a reflexive strike of a desperate man.

You’ve shown yourself so transparent of late, Lucius. However did I miss it, in the old days? “Tell your master that I thank him for the courtesy,” Severus said smoothly to the house elf following him, on the spur of the moment. “I’m sure even he gets lost in this place.”

“Oh, well *done*, Severus,” Bella said, her tone rich with approval. “I’d give my wand to have been able to see the look on his face when you said that.”

“No need,” Severus said, trying not to smile too hard. “I’ve brought Albus’ second pensive for just the thing –”

“He trusts you with that? I can’t imagine how much he has to transfer from it to his primary one, if that’s the case.” Bella slid out her arm from around his waist, the better to accept the as-yet empty stone bowl.

“Oh, this one’s always empty – I believe it’s a smaller model than the one he normally uses,” Severus said, as Bella ran her fingers over the runes around the edge of the bowl. “Perfect, therefore, for fobbing off onto suspect men such as myself.”

Bella simply grinned, handing him the pensieve. “Go on, fill it. I can’t wait to see the whole thing...”

Severus, eager to revisit the whole satisfying evening, did not make her wait long. And though Bella distracted him with her laughter and several kisses at inopportune moments, Severus was able to pinpoint the moment of his victory nevertheless – the moment he'd shown the Mark.

"I still hold that it was an inelegant move," Bella insisted, when they'd withdrawn from the pensive and sat side by side, discussing the conversation. "It would've been far more effective to make him believe that he extracted the whole truth from you – maybe if you'd led him to ask to be shown –"

"But he's the worst person for surrendering control of a conversation to, even by design," Severus said, drawing her closer. "Face it – you're prejudiced against it because it was my idea."

"And the rest wasn't?" Bella said, giving him a mocking look. "You know, sometimes –"

"It was the only one you argued against," Severus pointed out, accompanying his winning point with a covert attack on her neck. "Wasn't it?"

"Oh, don't, you fool – don't you need to be at Hogwarts by –"

"Yes, by midnight tonight, which, as you have to have noticed, is in an hour and a half."

Bella stuck out her tongue at him. "An hour and fifteen minutes, by your clock."

Severus smirked. "Semantics," he muttered, into the flushed skin on her neck. After he whispered the same thing into more – ahem – sensitive areas, she stopped complaining, and settled down to spend the hour and fifteen minutes left to them in a far more agreeable manner.

It surprised Severus when he woke up at six, as usual – after rushing around to shower and clothe himself, he could not help but mutter in disgust when he decided a *Tempus* would not be amiss, and found

that he was quite on time. Something about the whole thing galled him – was his body still so used to the combination of Bella and late nights on weekends that it simply carried on when faced with it again? Severus clearly remembered being too exhausted last night to bother with removing more than his shoes before heading for bed, and had looked forward to keeping his students waiting this morning and smirking to himself as they fearfully wondered why, and now, the only way he could achieve that would be to cool his heels within his rooms for two or three hours.

Muttering to himself, Severus cast about for a book or magazine to both entertain and shield himself with at breakfast. The only thing worse than being forced to linger pointlessly in these rooms was having to endure an early breakfast without such fortification, especially nowadays, with Lockhart's horribly unpredictable time of entrance. A sufficiently boring-looking book was usually enough to deflect the attention of a Lockhart that was Horribly Early for Breakfast; two was the safer amount for a Lockhart In Good Time, depending on how long the bastard had had to fortify his cheery, obnoxious self with tea or coffee before the meal.

Armed with the *Treatise on Beginnings of Fennel Use* and a dreary-looking copy of *Concoct It* (a quite useful edition on cauldrons), Severus made his way up to the Great Hall briskly, ignoring the flinches he earned from students as he passed them. He almost smiled when he heard someone whispering furiously about how he wasn't supposed to be back this early – *I assure you, Miss Bertram, I'm just as pissed off to be here as you are to see me* – and sighed in relief when he entered the Great Hall to see that Lockhart was nowhere to be found.

Still, better safe than sorry. Severus set up his book and magazine almost grimly, calculating angles and their impact on the visibility of their dreary covers with the ease of practice. Just as he'd helped himself to some soothingly hot porridge, Lockhart appeared – blearily smiled at Severus – moved away.

Breakfast went by quickly, after that, partly because *Treatise* wasn't as boring as it sounded, and partly because no one bothered him because of the books. Severus, once done eating, closed it with a

triumphant snap – after this reassuringly good start to the day, he could almost look forward to his first class.

Then Dumbledore appeared at his elbow, and spoilt everything. “Ah, Severus! Just the man I wanted to speak to – done with breakfast, aren’t you?”

Of all the bloody times – “Well, yes,” Severus said, slowly. *Couldn’t you just leave me in peace, just this* –

“Come along, come along, I won’t keep you long,” Albus said, smiling Severus into submission. He led the way to the little antechamber of the Hall with brisk strides and questions about Severus’ trip to the 4th Convention, which had been his cover for meeting ‘secretly’ with Lucius and secretly with Bella, and these only stopped once Severus had set up the silencing ward.

“Now, then,” Albus said, his smile becoming muted and serious, “how did it go?”

“Quite well,” Severus said. “I thought I said I’d give you the pensieve this afternoon, after –”

“Oh, you did – I simply couldn’t wait,” Albus said. “How well was quite well?”

“Well enough that Lucius’ll be paranoid all year, as we discussed,” Severus said impatiently. “Look, if you want the pensieve now –”

“No need, no need,” Albus said, waving a hand in dismissal. “Simply wanted to hear what you thought.”

Severus couldn’t help bristling at that. *For Merlin’s sake, after all we discussed* – “I hope you haven’t rethought the need to check the rest of the Slytherin team’s broom, Albus, because if you –”

“Of course not,” Albus said, interrupting him swiftly. “There is evidence that Lucius has ties to Marjorie Malkin, that’s all – if he is paranoid, he may decide to pull further strings in that direction.”

Severus blinked. “I do hope –”

"I said *further* strings, Severus. And I have warned her, yes," Albus said tiredly. "She told me she had no use for my warning – just that. I think she means that Malkin has already fired her." He sighed. "From the way she said it, I'm not sure I believe any other meaning is possible."

"Ah," was all Severus could think say. *She told you? And not me?* "Has she been able to procure employment elsewhere?"

"So far, no," was the simple answer. "I assured her, of course, that Mr. Black would attend here whether or not she could pay. I hope you don't mind her continued stay in your house...?"

"No," Severus said, hoping the anger stiffening his expression did not transfer to his voice. "Not at all."

Albus sighed again. "She led me to understand that her son does not know," he went on. "If you could keep him from trying to prove anything to –"

"I will, Albus." It was harder than he thought to keep back the sarcastic reply of how he and Antares were on the same level in her estimation at last, and even harder not to turn round and tell Albus of the whole thing. Since everything else seemed to reach him first, he might as well know –

"Cheer up, Severus," Albus said, patting him on the shoulder. "At least the House cup is guaranteed for Slytherin this year, eh?"

"Not if I find the fool behind those pranks," Severus said absently, because he couldn't think of anything less dangerous to say. "I'm quite willing to beggar the House for points for her sake –"

"Her sake? So you've decided the prankster is a she, then."

"I'm fingering that Avery for it, in fact," Severus said, seizing on to this relatively innocuous subject with relief. "Discovery would dampen her spirits quite nicely, I think."

"You don't suspect anyone else?"

“Oh, I do. I just think a girl, and that girl in particular, is the most likely,” Severus explained, shrugging stiffly as he did so. “She’s quite the little gang leader in her own right – tolerates no insubordination. And if you think of the myriad rules those little tyrants impose on their fellow witches – well. Mulciber breaks one, so a vicious prank is played on her. Easy enough.”

“So you’re not considering that any of the boys – say, Mr. Black, could have done it?”

Severus went still. “Albus, *Caligo* was used. That alone rules out everyone below third year –”

Albus gave him an indecipherable look. “Including the talented?”

Ah. It was like second year all over again, wasn’t it? Severus fought to keep his voice controlled as he answered, slowly, “Albus, you cannot seriously be implying –”

“All I wish,” Albus said, his tone almost sharp, “is for the correct person to be caught. Often, that means we must suspect everyone.”

“Of course,” was all Severus let himself say, before he left. The look on Albus’ face as he slammed the door behind him was hard to decipher, but did not suggest anything but determination, similar to the determination that had landed Severus in trouble just because he knew certain spells that others hadn’t, even when he hadn’t been guilty –

Well. Severus would prove him wrong – dead wrong. Antares’ prowess meant nothing but that he was talented, and Severus was going to make sure that one way or another, everyone in his House understood that.

Unfortunately, Antares did not seem inclined to better his reputation today. Or perhaps he had not been for some time – Severus had hardly noticed, with all the frantic planning and preparation that had gone into his meeting with Lucius over the last two weeks. In either case, the boy was noticeably quiet, and sat apart from his understandably worried-looking friends, and busied himself

throughout the lesson by botching his potion and glowering at everyone.

Last term – last year – any other time, Severus would have curtly ordered the boy to remain after class and browbeaten him into dropping the angry nonsense that was his stance and air. Now, of course, everyone expected him to prod and poke at Antares until either one of them lost control. Unsurprisingly, it was usually Antares.

As it was now.

“I see – you’ve lost the ability to understand English, as well as every whit of sense in your head,” Severus said, surveying the enraged Antares with what he hoped was a maliciously pleased air. “By all means, wait – I’m sure everyone wishes to know if you really can turn a darker shade of red than your disgusting attempt at a potion.”

For some reason, that broke Antares’ tense stillness. The boy slammed down his stirring rod without a sound and turned for the door.

“Class dismissed,” Severus said negligently, watching in wonder as Antares tried to storm out from the classroom in public for what had to be the first time. “Oh, and Black? Detention – oh, someone call him back, I don’t think he can hear me – ah.” Severus smiled at the remaining students. “Gone.” That seemed to shake them from their edgy fascination. The Gryffindors were the first out, looking stunned; Severus had done the unthinkable this time, and ignored Lupin’s usual disgrace of a performance in favour of focusing on Antares’ own, and it was easy to see that neither of Lupin’s pack wanted to stick around to find out why. The Slytherins left at a more sedate pace, led by an irritatingly cheery-looking Draco Malfoy.

All was silent, after that, except for Severus’ sighs, which grew more exasperated as he saw more and more of the shoddy work that had gone into the potions for today. Gritting his teeth, he moved past Lupin’s ominously smoking cauldron and stopped reluctantly in front of Antares’. Really was a shame that he’d effectively lost his best, or at least second best student this year to politics. Especially since he could see that the boy’s potion was still nowhere near as bad as some other examples in the class, despite how –

“GET OFF ME!”

Severus looked up, alarmed. What could –

An audible thud followed the shout, deciding him. Frowning, Severus drew his wand and strode for the door. It opened on a distressingly familiar gathering of students, silent with – *Merlin* –

“Drop him this *instant*, Mr. Goyle,” Severus said slowly, disregarding the sense of preservation that told him he really should wait and gloat, instead of – “*Now*, Goyle.”

Antares hit the ground clutching at his bloodied face, his body curling up in almost the same position as was Draco not three steps away. “Don’t even speak, Goyle – detention, and ten points from Slytherin –”

“But sir, he punched –”

“When I say don’t speak,” Severus said coldly, “surprisingly enough, I mean *don’t speak*. Begone, the rest of you – fifteen points from Gryffindor, for every minute you stood by and watched this.”

Neville Lupin went red. “But we didn’t –”

“Five more points, for inability to obey a professor. *Get out of here*, all of you.” Severus glared at Goyle and the bloody-knuckled Crabbe, who were foolishly trying to slink away. “I suppose you’re not stupid enough to think that applies to you, are you?” They shook their heads fervently, the motion reminding Severus vividly of their fathers. That two men so daft could have been so cruel – but this was important, this was an important moment. It wouldn’t do to botch it. “Draco, can you speak?”

“Mfi can,” Draco said hesitantly, his frame starting to uncurl as Severus approached him. “He – he ‘it me –”

“If I were you, I’d be worried about his mother appearing,” Severus said snidely, ignoring the confused tangle of feelings that surfaced with the thought of her. “She was always good at revenge. Do you not agree, Mr. Black?”

Antares stayed silent. Still, even. “Ah,” Severus said, tone as unconcerned as possible, “I think you got off a tad better than he did, Mr. Malfoy. Be that as it may,” Severus dragged Draco up onto his feet, his grip firm enough to put fear back into his posture, “fighting in these halls is forbidden. That goes doubly so for Muggle fighting –”

“He shtarted it!”

“I’m sure he did,” Severus said, suppressing the urge to roll his eyes as he let go of Draco with a sneer. “Ten points from Slytherin, nevertheless.”

Draco, now beginning to nurse his jaw, looked outraged. “For *what?*”

If Severus was not mistaken, that was a movement from Antares. He ignored it. “For not knowing when to allow your enemy a graceful retreat. I assume you two can escort your friend to the Hospital Wing?” Crabbe and Goyle nodded again, their nods almost in sync. It sickened Severus, watching those familiar gestures copied onto far younger, far more stupid frames.

Or perhaps it was just the thought of what he was about to do that made him really sick. “I suppose, Mr. Black, that you can walk yourself. In case you did not hear, you have detention tonight. Oh – make that all this week, for so obviously breaking the rules in my presence.” Severus made for his door, and, passing through it, slammed it shut. The wards went up automatically, for which he was absurdly grateful. It was one thing to leave Antares to what could easily become another beating, but quite another to hear it.

It took only a quarter of an hour for Severus to convince himself that leaving the classroom ostensibly to make a trip for somewhere – anywhere – would not look suspicious, whether he missed the entrance and assembly of his next class or not. However, by then, there was no sign of Antares or the other three boys. Severus paused on the threshold of his door and tried not to panic.

It didn’t work. The fireplace in his office was lit in minutes, and Severus was scanning the ominously empty office of Madame Pomfrey in more. “Poppy? Poppy?” He tried not to grind his teeth, tried not to think of whether those hideous little bastards had

somehow dragged Antares off to some other, less conspicuous place just to –

“Oh, for the love of – Severus! Just the man – I really do not understand what’s wrong with your House this month. Fighting – *Muggle* fighting, for goodness’ sake –”

“What? Who’s there? Is someone in the ward f–”

“Yes, *someone* is in the ward, Severus,” Poppy snapped, barely giving Severus a look as she bustled about the office in search of something. “Three bloody someones, at that – I suppose I should be glad your House gives me practice, I haven’t reattached a tooth in three days –”

“What?” Severus asked, in genuine surprise. Neither Crabbe nor Goyle had had enough time to really –

“Of course you don’t know,” Poppy breathed suddenly, conviction colouring her tone. “The *excuses* that boy gives – hah! Falling down stairs, ridiculous –”

“For Merlin’s sake –”

“You know, I don’t think I’ll do your dirty work for you this time, Severus,” Poppy said fiercely, waving a jar of something at him. “*You* find out what’s going on. Maybe you’ll finally realise that I’m not joking when I say there’s a discipline problem in that filthy house of yours.”

“Poppy –”

She left, banging the door closed behind her with a will, but not before Snape caught a minute glimpse of an angry-looking Blaise Zabini. Sighing in relief, he pulled his head out of the fireplace. However bad Antares’ injuries were, his friends looked to have gotten him to the right place.

Of course, that still left Poppy’s mysterious anger at him in question. Teeth reattachment – definitely not the sort of thing one needed regularly, and almost certainly involving Antares. Severus sighed

again – Merlin, but it didn't look good. Two weeks into term, and the boy was already, literally, a bloody mess –

Bella will kill me, Severus started to think, automatically calculating how on earth he'd present this all to her. Then he froze, remembering again that she hadn't even bothered to tell him about the *slight* problem of her unemployment, and –

But that solved nothing. Severus collapsed into his chair, hands twitching, determinedly ignoring the noise of students filtering into the classroom. This put quite a different light on the prank – Antares' talent could probably have stretched to somehow learning how to perform a *Caligo* or some similar spell, and it was plain that his motive, by now, was probably sufficiently strong to carry him through twisting the neck of the first daft chicken that ventured near his hand.

Severus wearily shook his head. It *still* didn't make sense, dammit – as smart as Antares was, who would have told him how to get past the numerous alarms on the girls' dormitory? And how on earth would he have gotten past the wards that Wilhemina Avery had put on the door in secret since fifth year? Those wards were the firm reason he believed Avery had done the deed in the first place. He'd only ever discovered them by mistake, on a bleary night of head counts after a scare from some lunatic student out for revenge on a former sweetheart.

More importantly, only her dormmates knew of the wards. It had to be them or her, and none of them were the sort to spill blood to make a point.

Gritting his teeth, Severus forced his mind away from those thoughts, rising to his feet. He had a lesson to get through, before he could do anything else, nevermind how important it was to find out why on earth Antares didn't think of telling Severus that his bullies were still terrorizing him.

Now, how to meet with the fool boy without arousing suspicion...

It took longer than Severus would have liked to think to remember why Antares was now waiting sullenly outside his classroom door,

looking faintly ill. “Get in and close the door, Black,” he said coldly, ignoring the twinges of guilt that peppered him as he took in the boy’s drained, sickly appearance. The lack of bruises suggested the use of one of those awful all-purpose *Consanescerum*-based potions – the ones that tasted like tar and felt like ashes going down.

For a long, foolish moment, Severus felt like asking which one. Then Antares sat down at the desk that had already been set up for his use, crowded with half-full cauldrons of various useful potions Severus had tested the sixth years on a few hours before, and the moment, miraculously, passed, leaving Severus with the far more correct desire to get down to the bottom of things as quickly as possible.

“When were you going to tell me you were still being bullied, I wonder?” Severus said, watching sharply as Antares began to decant one of the finished potions into vials with bored, practiced motions. “Antares –”

“You wouldn’t have done anything,” was the low answer. Severus gritted his teeth against the urge to explain himself – he knew firsthand how poor it was a consolation to be told your suffering was for some greater purpose. Not that it ever had been so for him, at Antares’ age, but – “You told me that yourself, first time it happened. What was I supposed to do?”

And, indeed, what would Severus have done, surprised, as it were, just before his pivotal meeting with Lucius? Severus did not try to believe he’d have done anything other than snapped at the boy. The realisation of how useless he must surely look to Antares stung, and made Severus glare at the boy and silently turn away, instinctively suppressing his strange need to explain. There really wasn’t an answer he could give, and surely none that Antares would accept, angry as he looked under that artificial calm.

After a while, Severus found himself trying again. “And those horrible excuses you gave Pomfrey, I thought –”

“Leave it, all right?” Antares burst out, not even looking at him. “God.” He set down a full vial with what was surely unnecessary force, seizing another and starting to fill it, all without looking up. “I’m not as

stupid as you think, for Merlin's sake – Quidditch practice starts this week, all right? And everyone knows –"

"Poppy's not stupid either," Severus pointed out. "She's worked here for years, boy. Don't you think she'd know what injuries a practice would cause by now?"

"And I suppose you just want me to *tell* her I'm being bullied," Antares snapped, looking at him for the first time, his eyes narrowed. "For fuck's sake, everyone would know it was me! How long d'you think I'd last after that, then? Look, I'm handling it –"

"Like you handled it this morning?"

Antares went red, and Severus half wanted to hit himself. The boy needed *help*, not more bullying –

"Leave me alone," was all Antares seemed to be able to say, firmly, though his hands were shaking a little now, as he set down another full vial of potion. "I'll handle it."

Severus glared at him again, making for his office. There was a time when pushing would have done any good. That time had obviously passed, and no amount of trying on Severus' part was likely to bring it back again. Now, all Severus had left to work with was the shaken, defiant little fool behind him, so work with him he would. Sighing, Severus sank into his seat, leaving the door wide open so he could watch the boy. Maybe another opportunity would come again, soon – sooner, if Severus could somehow pin the stupid prank to Wilhemina and make her fear his disapproval enough to curb the behaviour of her peers towards Antares.

The detention went by slowly, after that, but it still went by. Every so often, there was a too-loud clink or splash from Antares' direction; Severus ignored them, for the most part. Towards the end of the detention, they became more frequent, forcing Severus to snatch a look at his clock and debate as to how he could plausibly account for releasing the obviously stressed Antares from his detention early. The last thing he wanted was for the boy to hurt himself further in this

–

The classroom door banged open. “Professor! *Professor!*”

Severus rose at his desk, scowling. Why on earth hadn’t he locked it, this evening, suspicion notwithstanding? “Oh, for Merlin’s –”

“There’s been another prank,” the Slytherin boy said, ignoring Antares as he rushed toward Severus’ office door. He gulped, rubbing absently at a dark smear on his arm. “It’s – it’s worse –”

Severus forced himself to pick up his wand and begin to usher the boy towards the classroom door again, forced himself to drop his hesitation and confusion clean away. It was time for decisive action, by Morgana – “Where?”

“Fourth year’s dorm,” the boy babbled, barely noticed the stunned-looking Antares as he hastily dropped his materials and made to follow them. “It’s – all of the beds, not just one, and some,” the boy took a sharp, slightly hysterical breath, “some on the floor, and in trunks, and –”

“That will do,” Severus snapped, cutting him short. “You, Black, did I say you could leave your duties? Close the door and attend to them immediately – my door will open for you only when you have finished.” The resultant, if feeble protest at that pronouncement was cut off with a slam of the door and an imperceptible twist to the wards; only then did Severus actually look at the boy nervously leading him back to Slytherin and realise that it was Montague – Basil’s boy, for god’s sake, whose face was tight with fear, who was still convulsively wiping at his arm, at the streak of blood that somehow wasn’t going away, only smearing itself further onto his fingers. “Montague –”

“None of the blood comes off,” he said, shakily. “It’s weird, that’s all – Adrian and Charles wouldn’t do that to our own dorm, sir, I know you think it’s them that –”

“Let me see your arm,” Severus said, ignoring the boy’s babble with some effort – effort that became useless when he touched the boy’s bloodstained arm and felt the slight pull of a strong *Caligo*. Sure enough, the small bloodstain spread easily to his fingers, yet did not diminish naturally in size. “When did you discover the prank?”

"I didn't, sir," Montague said, staring at the blood on Severus' fingers in morbid fascination. "It – I think it was Adrian that got in, first," he ventured, slowing as they approached the entrance to Slytherin. "He took his shoes off, but the blood wouldn't come off –"

"The blood is the least of my worries tonight, I assure you," Severus snapped, giving Montague a quelling glare. "*Recte nunquam est.* Go in, Montague, go in." Severus nudged the reluctant boy through into the common room, waving the door closed behind them as he himself passed through.

The room was packed with his students, smears of blood in evidence on the furniture and on several green-looking students, most of whom were fourth years. The nervous chatter died down as Severus passed through, ignoring the guilty looks from those bloodied fools in damning proximity to the stained furniture. The scent of blood, mingled with the sweet smell of burnt meat, became stronger as he and the nervous Montague got closer to the dormitory that had been attacked. As Severus waved the stained, stinking door open, an acrid tinge to the smell became apparent, tying the two strong smells together.

He wasn't surprised, therefore, to find that the exsanguinated chicken the boys had found had been roasted as well – whole, with their feathers, hence the acidity. Stiffly casting a Bubblehead charm for himself and, on consideration, Montague, Severus quickly hunted out four more chickens in a similar condition, their small bodies twisted awfully out of shape. Blood seemed to be everywhere, splattering onto shoes and coating fingers with magical ease – also helping to cover the perpetrator's tracks, if any had remained. Now, any sort of readout on this room would show several footprints and the mark of many hands. Not that one would help at all, from the very nature of who was and was not allowed in this room –

"S-sir?" Adrian Pucey poked his head around the door, looking tentative. "The house elves sent one again – to – to er..."

"Whose idea was it to keep them from cleaning this mess in the first place?"

“Mine, sir,” Pucey said guiltily, opening the door a crack wider, but hesitating to step into the room. “I’m sorry – I just thought –”

“You did well, Pucey,” Severus allowed, straightening from a crouch over the five dead cockerels with an absent wipe of his hand on his cloak. “Tell the house elf that they may enter and clean up the mess.”

“Yes sir,” Pucey said, edging away from the door, still looking thoroughly guilty. Severus ignored it – what he knew of Pucey and his friend’s foolish little pranks dictated that they probably were not responsible for either of these recent, garish works. The pair of them would suffer a healthy amount of public suspicion, of course, for as long as Severus did not find the true culprit, as would anyone mildly enterprising in that way. However, the way he saw it, Pucey and Warrington could always stand to be taken down a peg. What was really at stake was the integrity, the relative peace of Slytherin, which would go down like a house of cards if the rumours of who did it all and why flew about for too long.

And, of course, Albus would have more chances to be sympathetic, and more chances to accuse Antares. *An all-round win-win situation*, Severus thought grimly, *but only if I win*. He sighed as Montague edged out of the desolate room, eagerly giving way to the fussing pair of house elves that popped into the room only seconds after Pucey had left. The elves immediately drew one of their strange circles, and started leeching the blood from the various surfaces in the room into the circle.

Severus drew back, observing silently as the blood exposed smelly sheets and unfortunately stained clothing. The bed in the centre of the room took the longest to become clean again, if as discoloured as the others, with a large damp spot on it being the last to turn that yellow-brown. Probably where the birds had been killed, if they were indeed killed in the dorm. That possibility, one that he had not seriously considered before, made Severus’ mind race with the various questions it engendered.

Severus sighed. Winning looked like it would take some doing.

A/N: Some acknowledgements, first: the, er, Lucius theory is patched together from the many things I've read in fandom over the past year – an essay about the lord-vassal structure of the wizarding world, another essay about the true relationship between Severus and the Malfoys, and lightningwave's delicious descriptions, to name three. Synthesis is one of my favourite things about being a writer, and having such wonderful ingredients to draw on is my favourite thing about writing in HP fandom.

That said, I'm really puzzled as to what happened to this chapter – I didn't intend it to come over all noir-y at the beginning, or all gory at the end. It was q bit of a strange write in places. Hopefully, though, you enjoyed it; if you didn't feel freer than air (bleh) to tell my why. Next chapter is from Antares' POV, and should be along in about a week if I can sort it all out in that time.

Chapter 8: Imaginings

All of Slytherin whispered, nowadays. Antares remembered when it used to be only when he walked by – “*Scum, that Black...did you hear he...wonder why they...*”

Now, though, things were different. “*He knew!* I know, I don’t know why –” “Surely you didn’t actually say –” “I didn’t! I wouldn’t! I just –” “I hear he thinks Willa did it – bollocks, don’t you think?” “Well everyone’s acting like we did it, I’d say she might as well be on the chopping block, same as we are...”

Antares stopped short, only partially surprised. Those last comments, those had to have come from –

“But Adrian, seriously, you’re being paranoid,” Charles said in a fierce low tone, his back to Antares. He sat opposite Adrian on the floor, near some armchairs opposite the entrance to the common room. “Surely Snape couldn’t have –”

“Shut up,” Adrian said, as his eyes locked on Antares. “What do you want, Black?”

Antares hesitated for a moment. They had to be talking about their interview with Snape, who was doggedly terrorising everyone in Slytherin in private about the chicken pranks – Antares hadn’t been subjected to one yet, and no one seemed to be talking much about them except to whisper and look suspiciously at each other. “Er – wondered if you two could tell me –”

“No,” Adrian said, flatly. When Antares just stared at him, taken aback, he shifted restlessly in his seat. “Private conversation, Black, all right? Don’t just stand there, push off!”

Antares gave Charles an incredulous look – no, scratch that, gave the back of Charles’ head a look. Charles didn’t do more than shift a little in place, as if Antares wasn’t even there. “Fine,” he said, hoping his voice sounded normal. “See you at tryouts.” It baffled him that Adrian didn’t even say a thing to that – just watched him all the way to where he normally sat in the common room, and that was that.

Just as Antares wearily sat down, the common room door slid open. In stumbled two third years, looking like they'd just narrowly escaped something nasty. A murmur greeted their arrival, but quieted as soon as one of them spoke.

"Andrea Lang and Sarah Frothwistle are next," she said tiredly. "And Snape said to say that they're the last for today." An audible sigh went up from several older years, and forced her to speak louder. "Rest of third year is tomorrow, then second year's on."

Antares went still, suddenly considering what Adrian had said. *He knew, I don't know why –*

Fuck, Antares thought, cursing the shaky logic that had had him reassuring himself over the last few days, thinking that Snape couldn't afford to use Legilimency on *anyone* just now, and that there would probably be someone there to keep watch on what he did to interrogate the students, or – *I have to know for sure, for fuck's sake*. He was up and going after the pair of third years in a second, and right behind them in a minute. "Er – hey! Hey, excuse me!"

The girl that had just spoken paused for a moment, though already on her way to the dorms. Her companion paused too, then strolled off, obviously not considering whatever Antares had to say as worth her time. With a sinking feeling, Antares realised the girl left standing before him was probably one of those third years who had joined those jeering at him two days ago when Rachel Rookwood and her mad twin brother had decided Antares needed to be magically blind for an hour. Since then, his vision went weird and blurry regularly at around eight at night, an occurrence that was still probably perplexing Madame Pomfrey right now.

"Was anyone there apart from Snape?" Antares asked, anyway, knowing that this wasn't the time to be picky about sources of information. "Because I heard –"

"Why do you want to know?" the girl asked, mulishly. "Got something to hide?"

"I'll just ask someone else, then," Antares muttered, turning away. When she grabbed hold of his shoulder, he twisted away, flicking out his wand on instinct.

"Touchy," the girl said, letting go of him with a sniff. "You're scared of Snape, aren't you? He hates you, you know –"

"Wow, thanks," Antares said, sneering at her. "I'd never have guessed."

"Aw, poor little Black – no one's going to save you from him tomorrow, if that's what you wanted to know," the girl said, sounding fiendishly happy at the prospect. Antares rolled his eyes uneasily and turned away, trying to tell himself to not – "It's just going to be you and him, Black. Just you and Professor Snape, all alone –"

"Fuck off," Antares muttered, out of principle, finally deciding to go to his dorm. She obstructed his way for a bit, not letting him pass, and even followed him a little way into the hallway that split off from the main one and into the boys' dorms, concocting all sorts of strange things Snape would probably do to him. Antares, walking into his dorm, closed the door behind him with a little more force than was necessary. Bloody bastards, each and every one of them –

"Black? What the..." Draco cursed, sliding off his bed immediately despite the game of cards he had going with Greg and Vince. "Is Snape calling second years yet?"

Antares ignored him, heading straight for his bed with a will. Blaise, absorbed in a book, only looked up as he swept by. When Draco actually began to head their way, Blaise sat up.

"Black, I'm talking to you –"

"And how many times do I have to say that I'm *not* talking to you?" Antares burst out, refusing to look at him. "Just piss off."

"This is important, you stupid –"

"I wouldn't spit on you if you were on fire," Antares pointed out, in what he knew wasn't a very calm tone. "I wouldn't look back if I left

you in a burning house, you stupid fuck. What makes you think I'd do anything to keep you from getting in trouble?"

"Look, just because –"

"You can't get my teeth knocked out and pretend I won't hate your guts, you idiot!" Antares shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "Just fuck off, for god's sake."

"We're in the same house," Draco insisted, looking – good *lord* – puzzled. "Or do you think no one'll prank you –"

"You lost the right to bullshit about us being in the same house a long fucking time ago, Draco," Antares said, through gritted teeth. "Now, *fuck off*." He drew out his wand and pointed it straight in Draco's direction, and watched with grim satisfaction as Draco sneered at him and began to make for his own bed again as if nothing had happened.

"Some people just can't take a hint," Blaise said quietly, closing his book. "Stupid, really – especially when he could just've listened to you tell me what was going on."

"No one asked your opinion, Zabini!" Draco called out, going so far as to flick a few cards in his direction.

"But it's a perfectly obvious solution," Blaise mock-protested, giving Draco a beseeching look. "Well, not if you're daft, but I suppose –"

The pillow that Draco threw hit Blaise squarely in the side, making him turn round and give Draco a glare. "It's not like I'm lying here, you stupid –"

"Let it go, Blaise," Antares muttered, flopping down into the space between their beds and leaning back against the side of his own. "He's too thick to get it, remember?"

"I heard that!"

Antares rolled his eyes at Draco's indignant tone. "Cover your ears, then!" he called back sarcastically, now reaching under the bed for his overflowing schoolbag. "What he needs is a permanent silencing

charm,” he muttered, digging through the bag for a quill. “You know, a personal barrier? Only a lot closer to him than normal, so no one can hear his stupid whining –”

“You *are* going to tell me what’s going on out there, aren’t you?” Blaise asked, rolling over to peer at Antares. “I mean –”

“Obviously,” Antares said, fishing out the diary from a pocket. He’d be damned if he helped Draco in any way by saying the unsettling news out loud, and anyway he’d need to tell Tom later on to get him to help. “Just a minute...there. Here you go.”

“Cripes,” was all Blaise said after peering at his note. “D’you think he’ll do the last third years during first break? If he’s done with them by then, could he start calling us in?”

“The boys are the ones left over, so no,” Antares said, frowning in thought. “He can’t do all four of them in twenty minutes, and even if he could, he wouldn’t have time to call us in without making them and any of us late for our classes.”

Blaise nodded, began to reach for his book again, then stopped, a look of horror coming over him. “God, we’ve got Transfig tomorrow, don’t we? Can you even imagine –”

“Snape wouldn’t dare,” Antares said shakily, unable to stop himself from imagining just how likely Snape was to dare, especially if it somehow meant Antares getting to Transfiguration hideously late. “I mean, blowing off Lockhart’s classes, disrupting them? He’d probably do that just for the hell of it. But McGonagall...”

“I suppose so,” Blaise said grudgingly, after thinking it over for a moment. “And anyway, the third years could have Flitwick or Sprout right then,” he went on, sounding more and more hopeful as he wriggled closer to watch the words Antares had written on the page sink in, as always. “Fuck, they might even have him.”

Antares shrugged, then began to rise shakily to his feet. If Snape decided to be horrible – extra horrible, tomorrow, there wouldn’t be anything they could do. And besides, what was the idea of being late

to Transfiguration next to the spectre of what Snape would do if he saw exactly what Antares had been doing these last two weeks?

Chicken scratch, Antares found himself thinking hysterically. *Merlin, if he sees* – “I guess we’ll find out tomorrow, then –”

Blaise grabbed hold of his sleeve. “What about Occlumency?” he whispered. “Should I –”

“Oh god,” Antares said, suddenly remembering that both Tracey and Blaise knew – knew about the Cloak, about Quirrell, about – “Fuck! I thought it’d only be me –”

“Idiot. Sit down,” Blaise insisted, his tone now almost too quiet to hear. “Tracey asked me – said she found out that Snape did the interviews on his own and all that. Probably reading everyone’s minds as hard as he can –”

“I – I –” Antares forced himself to take a deep breath, to shove down the panic. “I – I think I’ve got a plan, for me. But I don’t know –”

“Think, you idiot – memory charms! Didn’t we just start practicing the wand movements?”

Antares stared at him, completely unable to believe – *good, great Morgana, I’ve got to be imagining this...* “Don’t be daft, Blaise. That’s not the same as –”

“You’re the best at doing them already, Antares,” Blaise said, his whisper becoming alarmingly fierce. “It’s perfect, all right? You’ve already got a plan for yourself, you can just –”

“No,” Antares said, a little too loudly. He ignored a rude comment one of the others called over, still trying to wrap his head around what Blaise – what Blaise *and* Tracey were asking. It wasn’t working. “No, Blaise, it’s too dangerous.”

“Antar –”

“If I fuck up –”

“You *won’t*. It’s one thing, Antares, one simple thing you’d need to take out – do you not remember what the book said? Our minds would fill in the details –”

“Blaise –”

“If you don’t do it, Tracey will,” Blaise said quietly, heedless of Antares’ protest. “And *then* she’ll try to do it on herself.”

“Blaise!”

“One weak link is all this needs, Antares – you know that,” Blaise pleaded, his hands picking violently at his duvet cover. “You – you weren’t going to try to do the same thing, were you?”

“No!” Antares said vehemently, striving to keep his tone quiet. “I wasn’t – that’s – I was going to do this spell –”

“On yourself?”

“Not exactly,” Antares grudgingly admitted, picking up the diary out of defensive habit. “Tom said –”

“Oh, so *Tom* says, and you don’t care what Tracey or me –”

“That’s not it, Blaise! He’s smart, all right? If he’d never told me, I’d never have found the spell!”

“He,” Blaise said, in a tone of vast exasperation, “is a *diary*. You talk about it like it’s a bloody person –”

“I know it’s weird, all right? It’s just – it’s just a habit, Blaise –”

“And you want to trust a habit with knowledge like that? Merlin on a stick,” Blaise said, his tone becoming louder and louder. “Sometimes, the way you think things through –”

“You’re talking about this like we have options, Blaise,” Antares snapped, surging to his feet, feeling like the irritation was going to start pouring out of his fingers. “It’s this, or I don’t do the charm.” Squashing the diary back into one of his pockets, Antares climbed

into his bed without a backward glance, sloughing off his shoes with sharp, restless movements and throwing them over the other side of his bed. Blaise stayed silent on his left, not even replying to Draco's stupid remarks about contraception charms and how it was only an amount of time before one of them knocked up the other – "Shut up, Draco, or god help me, I'll come over there and shut you up myself!"

Greg laughed nastily. "Yeah, *after* we knock you to pieces –"

"Or I could just stick a Tickling Charm on him and let him laugh himself to death," Antares said, unable to keep himself from becoming louder and louder with rage. "Didn't you know, Draco? There's *Rictusempra* and *Rictusemproprum*." He kicked aside his bedcurtains and began to get out of bed, wand already in hand. "Just an extra syllable, don't you remember? Just like Flitwick said –"

"Oh for god's sake –"

"What would you like to bet that I'd get it on my first try?" Antares found himself saying, through gritted teeth. "Murder by mistake, eh?"

Blaise sat up at that. "Antares, just –"

"Fuck off, Blaise."

"Stay where you are, Black," Vince said threateningly. Antares ignored him, stamping around to Draco's bed regardless of how both Vince and Greg were glaring at him through their open curtains. "Black, I'm warning you –"

"No, *I'm* warning you," Antares spat, stopping firmly opposite Draco's bed. "I'm telling you you'd better fucking consider that cheering people on while they blind me and therefore fuck up my eyes is a very big incentive for me not to give a shit what happens to me should I happen to feel like getting my own back." He pointed his wand straight at Draco head, relishing the way he flinched. "Or should I say that in smaller words?"

The door to the toilets opened suddenly behind him, and Antares felt his wand slipping from his hand before he even heard Blaise's half-shouted spell. Shaking a little, he let it go, not taking his eyes off

Draco in a bid to see if – yes. The bastard was reaching for his wand, and his wand hand was shaking.

Somehow, that made it easy for Antares to smile and walk away. Calmly, despite Draco's hushed conversation with Ted – for it was him that had just entered the dorm – about what on earth had just happened.

"Here," Blaise said as he approached, tossing him his wand as if nothing had happened. Antares smiled at him too, recklessly. "You do know how stupid that was?"

"A laugh, though, wasn't it?" Antares ducked under his bed to hunt for a quill, taking deep breaths as he did so. It was odd to be so angry, and still so calm – "I'd hit him again, just to see that." Having found two quills and tossed back one, he climbed back into bed, drawing the curtains as he did so. So it wasn't a surprise that he only barely heard Blaise's response.

"Just be careful," it sounded like. Antares mumbled something in reply, already on the way to that, fishing the diary out of his pocket. He'd ask Tom about that spell right away, and if he wouldn't be reasonable, well. He'd just have to lay it on thick...

What's wrong now Tom wrote crossly, true to form. Oh, don't tell me, you want to talk about spells. AGAIN.

It's not my fault if I need to know them, Antares wrote quickly, making his handwriting as shaky as possible. Snape is a godawful bastard, and he's better at Legilimency than I am at Occlumency – he'll know in seconds. You've got to help –

I don't have to do a damn thing, Tom said, his writing starting to look more cross by the minute. You knew he knew Legilimency – sort it out.

If I could memory charm myself, I would. I can only do my friends, and that still leaves me.

Tom wrote slowly, exaggeratedly. *And that's my problem why?*

Antares paused, twisting the quill in his hands. That was the crux of it, really – Tom wasn't afraid of anything. The only thing Antares could think of that might do the trick might easily make Tom decide that teaching him how to remove his memories of the two pranks so Snape couldn't get his greasy brain on them wasn't worth his time. Still, though... *What do you think he'll do to you when he finds out?*

The only person that would worry me in that way is your mother, Antares, was Tom's answer. *And she's not here, is she?*

Antares bit his lip, hard, cursing himself for ever boasting about his mother's proficiency at, well, everything. *Why do you think I'm asking for help in the first place? She'd be the first to know.*

It was a minute before the reply to that began to appear. *Why do you want my help so badly? It's not like you'll be expelled if they find out.*

Antares restrained himself from throwing the diary against the headboard. *If Snape knows about the pranks, he knows about the cloak, you idiot! I'll be handing it to him on a fucking platter* and Antares stopped, shocked, because his words had sank away almost immediately, and Tom's reply –

You mean it's actually real? – was already there in their place.

Despite the fact that he'd thought about this, over and over again, Antares still hesitated before writing his answer. Yes.

It shimmered on the page, briefly, before sinking out of sight. *Have you ever borrowed something from the Restricted Section?*

That was easy to answer. Yes, Antares wrote, impatiently. *You mean without permission, right?*

You scoundrel, Tom wrote slowly, under that. *Well, you'll need to do that tonight. There's a book on the fifth shelf that you'll need – fifth shelf, second row from the bottom, five books from the start of the row when approaching from the rope...*

Antares rubbed his bleary eyes carefully, with his aching wand hand. Tom had been very, very clear on that – that his left hand wasn't to be used for anything for five hours after the spell. It had taken what felt like no time to steal into the library and retrieve the book. Thankfully, there was no need to return it, as all Tom had wanted him to do was read the spell description so that he knew what he was getting into.

Antares had spent most of his time trying to decipher how the meaning of *Impertio sons*, which was literally something like 'share the guilt', would do anything to transfer his memories to Tom like he'd insisted it would. He'd given up after a while, replaced the book, then returned to his dorm ready to tell Tom that he didn't think it would work. And then Tom had urged him to do it then try to remember strangling anything anywhere.

Antares still couldn't. Tom had said that that was a good thing, and had made sure Antares repeated the spell just to get rid of the memory about some cloak or other, which Tom had also insisted was important. When Antares had sarcastically asked him how on earth Snape wouldn't just be able to order him to fish out the diary and reverse the spell, Tom had said something vague about the spell being able to sort that out when it was time. By then, Antares had been too tired to do more than seize the chance to nap while it was still dark out, and had been asleep in minutes.

It hadn't done much good, though. He was still so tired, and Blaise had actually had to shake him awake –

"Are you all right?" Tracey said, from nearby. Antares shrugged, wiped his eyes again, and continued to eat. "Blaise, is he all right?"

"Just give it up, Tracey, he's been like this all morning," Blaise said, sounding irritated. "I think he just had a bad night –"

"Oh." Tracey slid into her seat opposite Antares, still looking worried. "Did you tell him –"

"He'll do it, yeah. Won't you, Antares?"

Antares nodded slowly, a little confused. "Um, I think so."

Blaise stared at him for a moment, then smiled. "It worked, then? So soon?"

"Yes...?"

Tracey looked about as unhappy as Blaise looked excited. "Don't tell me you let him charm himself –"

"No, no, it's fine – he had help from his mangy little book," Blaise said quietly, grinning at him. "Didn't you?"

"Oh right, yeah," Antares replied, finally understanding. Maybe he and Blaise had even talked to Tom about doing the spell – *Im – Im* – something was all Antares could remember now. Blaise was now whispering on about some conversation they'd had last night about it, and he seemed to think it was good that Antares couldn't remember a strange cloak. So did Tracey, interestingly enough. It was a little confusing how relieved they looked at that, and how Antares asking for Blaise to pass a jug of apple juice flew by him so easily because of it. Shaking his head at it all, Antares poked Blaise in the arm. "I thought you were going to pass me that." When Blaise looked at him in confusion, he sighed. "The juice, Blaise, for Merlin's sake –"

"Calm down, I'm passing it," Blaise said cheerily, having started to float it over to him. "And oh – Antares, you never told me if the diary said anything about the spell being flexible."

Well, that was easy – probably that vague stuff Tom had said about it earlier on. "I think it said so, yes," Antares said, eyeing the wobbling jug as it came closer to him. "Blaise, for fuck's sake, be careful –" Too late. The jug sloshed into his plate as it thumped down before him. "You know, this is only funny if you do it to Draco."

"God, you're a genius – *Wingardium leviosa!*" The jug sloshed some more all over Antares' already soggy toast before wobbling away in the direction of the unsuspecting Draco. "So you'll be able to sort us out during first break then?"

Antares shrugged. "Why not?" He'd probably be able to get them out of Charms early, too, if Flitwick was in the mood to rush this morning. Minutes later, he found that he wasn't too tired to laugh – Blaise's

lack of aim resulted in making Draco's hair look like it was covered in pee, and for once, everyone at the table began laughing at someone other than Antares. Or, at least, they did, until every half-empty jug on the table emptied themselves on Antares' head some minutes later.

For once, the staff table was roused, and Antares soon had the joy of watching Avery and Rookwoods scowling carefully at McGonagall, and thinking that having them lose points like that was the next best thing to finally getting back at them himself, if a little less satisfying. He yawned, following Tracey and Blaise out of the Great Hall as quickly as he could. At least he couldn't be punished for anything just now, as he might have been if he'd done anything to the bullying seventh years. God knew what Snape would do to the idiot who'd done that strange stuff with the chickens – Antares didn't know why the man was still pretending it might have been anyone other than an upper year, with this interviewing crap. It was only making it worse for people like Adrian and Charles, who everyone suspected, but probably hadn't done a thing.

Antares shrugged, staying as still as he could while Tracey dried him off, still giggling. *I suppose that's Snape for you.*

Antares sighed. How on earth had he ever thought they'd get out early from Charms? Flitwick was still stuck on Freezing Charms, and had been merciless with the forced practicing for the last few classes. Every single time they'd revised the charm, they'd gone on working past the bell for first break. Today was no different – Flitwick only just let them go ten minutes into break, after whingeing from the Hufflepuffs, which Antares was still resentful about. When Slytherins whinged, teachers glared about, but when *Hufflepuffs* –

“Do you think we still have time?” Tracey whispered frantically, cutting short Antares' inner grumble. “We've only got five minutes –”

Antares stumbled, suddenly *remembering*, suddenly understanding – “It'll only take five. Let's find a classroom, quick –”

In minutes, they were huddling in an empty classroom not far from McGonagall's, and Antares was trying to ignore the guilt he felt after locking the door with an *Offirmo*. Blaise and Tracey had a quick,

panicked bicker about who should go first, and then Antares was slowly saying the charm, eyes shut tight, mind straining to remember what his friends wanted to forget. For some long, strange moments, it felt like he'd detached from himself and was watching someone else remove and obscure Blaise and Tracey's memories of the Cloak, and of the last few Occlumency lessons they'd had, because those were dangerous too.

Then it was him, feeling disoriented as he gripped his wand in his strangely aching hand, and wondering –

"What were you saying, just then?" Blaise asked, looking puzzled. "Don't we have Transfig in a minute?"

"Yeah, sorry," Antares said, feeling equally perplexed. "Well – can't remember, so let's just go. Do you think she'll do a pop quiz this time, or...?"

"Face it, the cow can't help herself," Tracey said, tugging confusedly at the door. "She just wants – oh, this stupid door –"

"*Affirmo*," Antares said at it, not knowing why he thought it would work. He lowered his wand in surprise as the door seemed to shrink, and come violently open at Tracey's determined pull. "Come on, we don't want to be late –"

They were anyway, huffing and puffing into their seats while Draco glared at them. McGonagall's own chilly glare seemed less chilly than usual, for some reason, and she didn't stop to ask them where they'd been, and why on earth they were late. Antares liked to think it was because of the scene in the Great Hall, and inwardly thanked whatever the reason was anyway; he wasn't quite sure he'd have been able to answer why they were late, if asked. And, from Tracey and Blaise's relieved expressions, they probably couldn't either.

The lesson went by quickly, if a little strangely. Antares found that he really didn't dislike sharing out the beetles to everyone this time, even if several of them bit him or almost escaped up his sleeves. It was such an odd feeling to not be as wary of them as he remembered that he couldn't quite concentrate on turning his own beetle into a button. He got round to that soon enough, of course, after McGonagall glared

directly at him for the second time, and his button turned out to be an exact replica of the kind Bella liked to use on the robes she made, square and shiny and strangely soft.

Blaise's button turned out an ominous, dull black – almost the shade of Snape's robes. Not a coincidence, really, as he and Tracey kept on glancing nervously at the door and exchanging worried glances. Antares thought it a bit silly, since he knew they hadn't had anything to do with the chicken pranks, and hadn't been doing anything seriously against the rules just yet. As horribly as Snape might behave outwardly to him and, by extension, his friends, the man probably already knew who he'd accuse of the pranks, and was just terrorising everyone in Slytherin for show.

When Antares tried to explain that to Tracey as they left McGonagall's classroom, she scoffed at him. "He's *got* to have an agenda, don't you see? He can't just be doing it this way round for nothing –"

"Well, couldn't it be him just wanting everyone to think that way?" Antares pointed out, patting his pockets absently for the diary. Tom would have – hadn't Tom even said that, or something like it? Antares blinked and thought, and shrugged when he couldn't remember anything like that. "Anyway, who cares? I definitely don't, if he pulls me out of DADA to interview me. Eh, Blaise?"

"Well obviously, but –"

Antares elbowed him in the side, unable to keep back a grin at how worried his friends looked. "*Relax*, all right? It's not like we can do anything about it now, is it?"

Later on, as Snape herded him mercilessly toward his classroom with a distinctly predatory look on his ugly face, Antares began to plan to apologise to Tracey about the 'just relax' bit. Several times. For some reason, Snape had decided on fetching him himself just after the bell for second break had gone, and just when Lockhart was just about to select someone else to subject themselves and everyone else in class to yet another reading from one of his awful books. Antares still

wondered how on earth someone could manage to make staying in Lockhart's presence look like the safer option.

As it turned out, though, his fear was in vain.

"Right," Snape said, wearily, once the door had closed behind them. "Sit down if you like, this won't take a moment..." Antares, staring a little at the way Snape's scowl was now more tired than anything, took a little longer than usual to sit fairly near the front of the class. Snape ignored him completely, simply settling into the chair behind his desk and sighing irritably.

"Um, I thought –"

"Just be quiet, for goodness' sake," was all that was snapped back at him. "Good grief, what I would *give* for silence –"

"You mean you aren't going to question me?" Antares asked incredulously, ignoring the glare that was sent his way at the question. "But shouldn't you –"

"Be quiet or I will make you so," Snape said firmly, and that was that. Antares fidgeted in nervous disbelief as the minutes passed by with Professor Snape humming darkly to himself and shifting papers around on his desk. Just when Antares had decided to risk asking another question, the humming stopped, and Snape looked up. "I would appreciate it if you flew into one of those rages if anyone asks you what went on just now," he said – and Antares couldn't help boggling at this – encouragingly. "Out with you. And send in Bullstrode after you, with Crabbe to follow."

"Yes, sir," Antares said faintly, feeling oddly relieved that that had been all. For a moment, he'd thought Snape would try to ask him an actual question relating to the pranks. Then again, that was a little silly, considering that the man knew just as well as Antares did that he had had nothing to do with them.

Hours later, when Blaise returned to the common room muttering dark, wickedly funny little insults about Snape's hair and breath and parentage, Antares began to feel rather grateful that the man hadn't

decided to grill him for authenticity's sake. From the grim look on Tracey's face after she had returned from her own questioning, he had a lot to be grateful for – not only had Snape thoroughly unnerved her, he'd made her bitingly suspicious of Pansy and Daphne for reasons she refused to talk about. As for the rest of the year –

"I didn't tell him, Draco, honest!" Greg cried again and again, looking truly unhappy at the way Draco was icily ignoring everything he said. "I didn't even think about it!"

"Well maybe you did!" Draco snapped, glaring at him. "Merlin on a stick, it's like he could hear what I was thinking –"

"Too right he can," Blaise muttered, writing so fiercely on his parchment that the ink bled through to the other side. "Bloody bastard's got a mind like rotten fruit..."

Antares, after a look at his friend's angry face, decided that now would be the worst time to ask what on earth that had to do with Snape being able to read minds. He sighed instead, hoping it sounded vaguely sympathetic, and went on trying to help Tracey get her head around the beetle-button conversion. "You know, if you just think of them as still and pretty – just imagine them as how they might look like as a button –"

"But I *did* that," Tracey exclaimed, throwing down her quill. "I'm not stupid, you know; I actually *listened* to McGonagall when she went through the theory side of things!"

"I know, Tracey, I just mean –"

"I'm not stupid, okay? I can see when people don't like me, after all – when they're just using me for their own sick little games because they think it's all a laugh," Tracey went on, glaring down at her Transfiguration notes with a fervour that Antares was quite sure they didn't deserve. "Can't I, Antares?"

"You know, maybe we could save Transfig for later –"

"You know, I'm starting to wish I *did* know who did those pranks," Blaise suddenly burst out, throwing down his own quill. "Then I could

suggest they did Snape's rooms next, with a – with a fucking cow or something.”

“If they used a cow, his room would be knee-deep in blood,” Tracey said, shaking her head. “Don’t you remember? They’d just need a small animal – the spreading spell’s what makes it look like there’s blood everywhere –”

“Yeah, but why would Snape’s rooms being knee-deep in blood be a bad thing?”

“Because it’d mean the person who did it would get caught in five minutes,” Antares said, finally laying down his own quill. Wasn’t like they had been getting anything significant done while waiting to be interviewed, anyway. “Can’t you feel the wards in his classroom? It’s like a bloody onion in there.”

Blaise snorted, the disbelief almost tangible in the look he gave Antares. “And how the fuck do you know?”

“It’s – it feels heavy in there,” Antares said lamely, fighting to remember just why he knew that that sort of heaviness meant wards, or could mean wards, or something. “And it’s obvious, all right? If someone really wanted to, they could just, I dunno, lob something in someone else’s cauldron. Like fireworks or something. No one ever does that – fuck, no one even thinks about doing that –”

“Including the Weasley twins?” Tracey said sarcastically. “God, it’s good to know they’re no one.”

“Shut up, they’re obviously – I doubt the wards up to stop people thinking like that wouldn’t have a chance against them,” Antares said hastily. “Maybe it just works on people who haven’t already thought about it.”

“Or maybe you’re full of shit, and there aren’t any wards like that,” Blaise shot back, rolling his eyes. “Thought wards, *honestly* –”

“QUIDDITCH!”

Almost everyone jumped at Flint's piercing shout. Antares cursed and caught the table he, Blaise and Tracey had been writing on as it toppled over from the way Tracey had kicked it as she sat down again.

Flint looked smug as he turned and wafted a lurid little flyer over to the notice board, where it stuck itself right over several others. "Trials are Saturday after lunch, as usual. I will actively work to make every new person trying out throw up. Thanks for your time, everyone!" Grumbling set up as he sat down again, looking enormously pleased with himself.

Antares tried not to grin as he noticed the too-calm expression on Draco's face – served him bloody right, after all the times he'd teased Antares for refusing to eat much at meals before practices last year –

"Are you trying out, Black?" someone said from behind him, nudging him a little in the neck. Antares, startled again, turned round to snap at the person and found only an embarrassed-looking Daphne staring down at him.

"Does he need to?" Blaise asked mockingly, rolling his eyes. "Christ, what a question –"

"Actually, he does," Tracey said, a horridly sweet smile on her face. "So you and Pansy do have a reason to come along and make bets with everyone about how long it'll take him to fall off his broom. Wicked fun, isn't it?"

Daphne, looking flustered, started to edge away. "We were only joking, Tracey –"

"So that's why Pansy promised Draco she'd try to hex Antares' broom before tryouts, is it?" Tracey went on, her tone becoming horribly sarcastic. "Oh, no! I don't think I was supposed to say that – was I?"

"Don't be an idiot, Trace! You know Pansy can barely leg over her own broom, much less hex anyone else's –"

"But she was going to try," Tracey said, nodding in mock approval. "I understand, Daphne, don't worry."

“You know, for someone who thinks everyone’s out to get them, you say a lot of things you wouldn’t like other people to know, much less tell everyone else,” Daphne said coldly, her colour rising dangerously. “Oh, sorry, Tracey – I forgot that you think you don’t have any secrets –”

Tracey’s wand appeared in her shaking hand, causing Daphne to go still. “Go on, Daphne – *spill*.”

“*Expelliarmus! Expelliarmus* –”

“What – Antares, give it!”

Antares, already nearly in front of a bored-looking Millie Bulstrode, didn’t stop to listen to the half-shrieking of Tracey behind him. “Here, Millie – hide them –”

“You stupid little freak, give it *back*!”

Antares blinked, surprised at just how loud Daphne could shout, then turned, having made another decision. “*Expelliarmus!*”

Pansy squealed, then turned to glare. “What the hell are you playing at?”

“Making sure this is a fair fight,” Antares said, pressing Pansy’s wand into Millie’s eager hands to join Tracey’s and Daphne’s. “You won’t give them back, will you?”

To say Millie looked smug at that would be an understatement. “Nope,” she said, tucking all three wands into one of the giant pockets in her robes.

“Good luck, then,” Antares said hastily, now heading for the common room exit as quickly as was possible. Hopefully, Pansy and company wouldn’t think of following him – if they did, it was bound to be an unpleasantly cold night.

As it turned out, the girls did try to hunt Antares down, but gave up after a few minutes, deciding to try for Millie instead. In any case,

Antares stayed put in a neat, if drafty little dungeon not far from Slytherin for almost half the night, judging correctly that no one would bother to come looking for him, be they bully or friend. Getting back to Slytherin was a cold, boring little journey, and thankfully remained that way all the way to his bed. That it was bare of all but the mattress and the curtains didn't upset him at all – with the curtains drawn, it was warmer and softer than any other bare bed he'd slept on in his life.

The next day went by surprisingly quickly, in a blur of classes and whispering and wanting, the last on his part. For while his housemates looked over their shoulders and obsessed about what Snape might be obsessing about, temporarily closeted in his rooms to think on the evidence he'd extracted from Slytherin over the last few days, Antares looked ahead and saw the Quidditch tryouts. He saw himself finally getting on the team and becoming the Seeker it badly needed to be truly good. He saw a few hours of easy flying, and maybe some minutes of snickering at those foolish enough to try to compete for a position he already saw as his.

Somehow, the thought that that small victory was around the corner didn't compare to nibbling absently on a warm roll and watching Flint stalk into the Great Hall looking smugger than ever, and knowing that it was minutes away. Antares watched Flint and his cronies settle farther down the table carefully, as usual, knowing that not leaving for practice when Flint left would be a sure way to becoming the first to fly laps around the pitch upside down that day.

Then Flint rose, and it was Quidditch time. Walking out to the pitch seemed to take only seconds, despite the fact that almost no one spoke to Antares. As it was, he felt too keyed up to really care – this was the first time he'd flown since that day before term had started, and he couldn't think why he hadn't even tried since then. Well, apart from the worrying thought that Avery and the rest would actually follow him out and bother him on purpose, but that was almost second nature these days.

Antares didn't try to keep the bitter half-smile off his face at that thought, though it dropped off when he spotted Yaxley coming out onto the pitch with the Rookwoods. What on earth were they –

“Hey, Black! Just because I do this every practice doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be listening,” Flint snapped, putting an abrupt stop to Antares’ line of thought. “Eyes front, for fuck’s sake.”

“Sorry,” Antares muttered quickly, not caring that it was ignored. It was always a bad idea to forget to apologise to Flint, so –

“ – as we’ve got so many lily-livered applicants this time around, we’re going to play a bully game,” Flint continued, a rather ugly look on his face. “Get the real balls out, Warrington – no sense in stinting.”

“Including the Snitch?” Charles asked, looking disbelieving. “I mean, I love Quidditch, but I don’t fancy playing for five hours out here, if you what I mean...”

The incredulous disgust on Flint’s face made Charles splutter into silence. “Are you daft? Black can catch that thing with his eyes closed. Or d’you think I’d actually play a bully match if I didn’t think my side would win it?”

Adrian, typically, stepped in. “Look, Marcus, Charles wasn’t –”

“Keep answering for him, Pucey, and I’ll see you take the curses for him too,” Flint said menacingly, not even deigning to look in Adrian’s direction. “Balls, Warrington, and be quick about it.”

Charles, already headed off in the direction of the broom shed, didn’t wait for a repetition. After a moment of nervous consideration, Adrian followed him, leaving Antares, Higgs, Bole and Derrick to preserve the uncomfortable silence that had just sprung up.

Well, except Higgs. “Marcus, you know what putting Black on the team without tryouts’ll do to Eddie –”

“And that’s exactly why I’m doing it,” Flint said, smiling slightly at the nearing troop of hopeful students, which was headed by a rather smug-looking Edmund Yaxley in what looked like full Quidditch gear. “I’ve fucking had it with his whingeing – he was a crap captain, for all that posturing. I’m just making sure he feels like a crap player as well.” He gave Antares what looked frighteningly like an encouraging glance. “Right, Black?”

"He's stronger than me," Antares found himself saying, at a loss for anything else.

"And bigger, yeah," Flint said, his smile becoming scary with anticipation. "Which means you'll be lighter, and fly faster. Which means we'll win." Dropping the smile, he stepped forward to meet the group of potential team members with his usual cheer, leaving Antares to wonder if he dared to think he could beat Ed Yaxley in the air.

Fifteen minutes later, he amended the question: it was more a thing of whether he dared to beat the bastard, really. Apart from Flint being right about his being faster than Yaxley in the air, Antares was still trying to get his head around the realisation that he was just better than him on a broom. He turned easier. He ducked quicker. His dives had more angle, more edge. And though he had to squint to see it, he was probably faster at spotting the Snitch.

"GO GET IT!" someone was roaring madly on the sidelines, as Antares flew straight at the telltale glint hovering in the air some feet away above the action of the game. If he'd had a breath to spare, he'd chuckle and look to see if it was Tracey – if anyone was a random spotter, it was her. But he didn't, so he just flattened to the broom and aimed for passing just a little to the left of the glittering Snitch, watching it, watching it –

Someone shouted below him, and Antares, only half listening to what they'd said, impatiently dodged a Bludger, and somehow the Snitch had done what he'd thought and gone to the – well, that wasn't important, now that he had it, wings beating madly against his fingers. Yaxley swung to an angry stop in front of him, glaring at Antares as he nudged his restless broom into turning him upside down so he could catch his breath.

"That was a lucky catch, and you know it," Yaxley said, sounding like he was speaking around gritted teeth.

Antares could only stare at him, then hastily turn himself right side up, just in case Yaxley was angry enough to actually try something. "That was Dart method, straight up," he said slowly, since the older boy was still hanging about as if he wanted an answer. "Flint taught me."

“Your angle was off, and you rolled too soon,” Yaxley said matter-of-factly, his tone disgusted.

“Actually, randomisation makes it more accurate,” Antares shot back, despite knowing how he’d scoffed to himself when Flint had said it with near-religious fervour. “And I’ve got a good reach, so...” he shrugged, and could nearly not resist waving the Snitch in Yaxley’s sneering face. “Who knows. Maybe I *am* just lucky – oh, hey –” The Snitch, which had been struggling in his grip, slipped out.

Antares lunged after it, mindful of the fact that if Yaxley caught it, it would be only too easy for him to pretend he’d gotten it first. Yaxley lunged too, nearly colliding with Antares in his desperation, but he was already too late – the Snitch was now fluttering again in Antares’ grip.

And still, Yaxley sneered on. “Bet that little idiot Malfoy was right,” he said, flicking his eyes up and down Antares with disgust. “Maybe your mum *did* fuck herself with a broom while pregnant with you. Think it was worth it?”

“All right, then,” Antares said, hoping his voice was steady. “Best of five.” He flung away the Snitch, watching in satisfaction as the stupid bastard lunged after it again as it sped off. “Next time, though? Forget using the Maymouth lunge – only works if you don’t weigh five times your broom. Fatarse!” Yaxley tried to veer round in his direction, a murderous look on his face, but in the next moment, Antares was diving steeply down for the bleachers, fast enough that there was no point in trying to follow. A quick word in the right ear, and the game had started up again, and Flint was grinning outright as he decked all but one of the other team’s Chasers and turned to hound the only one that was still trying to score.

Antares, still angry, just tightened his fingers around the handle of his broom and willed the Snitch to appear. No way he was letting it do anything but play right into his hands, not now. No fucking way.

“Best tryout *ever!*” Blaise yelled, his arm tightening around Antares’ neck until he could barely breathe. “God, whose idea was it to do the match?”

"I don't know," Tracey said, tossing another arm around Antares' shoulders, "but I think they're a bloody genius. Did you see Draco? And that Chaser? Poor girl, I actually felt sorry for her, having that git crash into her –"

"At least he doesn't stink like our friend here does," Blaise said, finally detaching his arm from around Antares' neck. "No offence, mate, but I thought Seeking was easy for you – sweating this much can't be natural –"

"Didn't you see? He was doing a one-on-one with Yaxley!" Tracey said impatiently. "What was the score again?"

"Five-zero, best of five," Antares repeated for the fourth time, unable to stop himself from grinning again. "Last one was the best – thought I'd puke laughing at the look on his ugly face –"

"Found that funny, did you?"

Antares, easily recognising the threat in that sneering tone, drew in a sharp breath and reached for his wand. He was lucky – Yaxley would have had it in a minute, just like Blaise and Tracey's wands. This way, Antares got to stand shakily with them and cast the first spell. "*Mordeo!*" Antares shoved at his friends as soon as he saw Yaxley wince – *god, maybe this'll work* – and began to cast, darting backward with each spell he let off. "*Mordeo – Instabillartus – Mordeo* –"

Tracey's scream stopped him in his tracks, and the next second, he was wandless and watching Blaise drop, senseless, to the floor, from a burst of red light from Avery's raised wand. The desperate choice to *Accio* a wand, any wand, was taken from him with the burn of the spell that hit next, and rendered impossible by the sudden realisation that he couldn't feel his hands. Darkness descended the next minute, just as he was about to hit the floor.

And then, minutes later, it was gone.

"Eddie, stop that! He can't take it!" someone insisted, from far above. Antares tried to move – unwise – and found himself retching

something red onto the floor beneath him. *Blood*, he realised, *I'm vomiting blood* –

Yaxley scoffed, and cast something else that made Antares feel like he was coughing out his insides. “Don’t be a baby, Rachel –”

“I’m not saying stop, I’m saying lay off the Coughing Curses, you prick. They can kill him!” Antares, closing his eyes, tried to curl away from her voice, away from everything, but found that her brother’s voice was on the other side.

“...we doing this or what? Crap, the bugger’s moving – *Inhaereo solum!*”

Antares tried to scream, and found himself gurgling instead. Why on earth had he thought his hands were numb? They *hurt*, everywhere hurt, like his skin was stretching violently all over him somehow. When he tried to turn, he found that his cheek was glued to the floor, and –

“Having fun, Black?” Yaxley said, from nearby. “Don’t worry, this next one’s even better –”

“No, Eddie, let me,” Avery said, her eager tone easily drowning out his low, pleased-sounding voice. “Just watch – *Caligo.*”

Antares began to choke, more from anger that they were using that spell against him than the horrible feeling of having his mouth fill with blood. He tried hard to cough it out, but there was so much – he could hear laughter. *Laughter*. It hurt so much it felt like something was cracking inside of him.

I'll use a cow, next time, he thought madly, starting to cry. *I'll drown you, I'll drown you all* –

Rachel Rookwood’s low giggle cut off his fragmented train of thought. “Look at the little idiot cry!”

“That’s nothing, Black,” her brother said, the smirk in his tone almost overpowering. “You can do better than that. *Ploro!*” A horrible, gulping wail set up somewhere nearby. It took the hysterical laughter around

him and the burning in his eyes for Antares to understand that it was probably him.

“Fucking perfect, Robert, look at him!” Yaxley crowed. “D’you think he’ll choke on those?”

“I don’t see why we can’t find out –”

“Oh, let me, let me! *Obsaturo!*”

The feeling that that spell induced was one of the most terrifying Antares had ever felt. Before the curse, he’d started swallowing blood out of desperation; after it, his throat closed, and he inhaled some by mistake, and the burning that that caused made him fight weakly against the hold of the stuff that held him to the floor. His eyes burned still, and he found himself fighting to scream, and then he couldn’t breathe –

When the darkness came this time, it was welcome.

A/N: Again, apologise for the cliffhanger. Hopefully, the next chapter should be up in a few days. Criticisms? Outrage against my writing? Glaring errors? Tell me about them, either on my livejournal or with the comment facility around here – I will answer you eventually, and I love getting them, so fire away!

Chapter 9: Revelation

Antares didn't know when the darkness gave way to dreaming, but by the time he realised it, he was somewhere in Hogwarts, walking slowly. There was no pain, no burning, no laughter. It was beautiful, and made him wonder absently if he was dead, or a ghost, though the latter idea repelled him. As much as he dearly wanted a chance to pay Avery and Yaxley and *everyone* back, he hated the idea of having to hang around, well, forever, to do it.

Still, this was nice. Antares felt half as if he was watching himself stroll up and down the corridors, turning here and there in the half-darkness, brushing a hand he couldn't feel against the walls. Second floor, he decided. Second floor.

That was important, his dream self urged. Important – left, right, left, left, enter there. Antares sighed in relief as he watched himself open the door to what looked like the girl's loos – not a ghost, then. And even if this was a dream, he wasn't a ghost, because ghosts didn't dream –

"Open," he heard himself say, and suddenly they were somewhere very dark. Smelly, probably, by the way he heard himself curse. Moments passed in the dark before they emerged...somewhere. A hall, it looked like. Antares bemusedly watched himself wander them, and only began to pay attention when he saw himself open a set of ugly, menacing doors with just a word.

Finally, this dream gets good –

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four," his dream-self said. Antares watched in bewildered awe as something cracked, high above them, impossibly high – *is that – could that be a snake?*

Antares stared at it. Huge, bloody – *huge*, was all he could think. And graceful, fuck yeah, to be swirling down from so high and landing without a fuss in the dust at their feet. Its eyes were closed, strangely. He wasn't sure why, but found himself wanting to know – wanting to see the massive snake's eyes, wanting to talk to it, see what it was like –

“Master,” it murmured, and Antares grinned. If only this dream was true – the things one could do with such a snake – “I hunger, master. Feed me.”

Antares gulped. Well, perhaps –

“Four snakes, for you,” his dream self said, smirking. “I will lead you to them soon.” Antares sighed, knowing exactly who he was talking about. Merlin, if only – “Be still, for now. We will speak again.”

“Yes, master,” the snake said, after a pause. It flicked out its massive tongue at him, almost a little petulantly. Antares, who remembered being rather hungry after that ill-fated practice, could deeply understand. Practically, however, it didn’t stop him or his dream self from edging away as the snake slithered around him slowly and began to surge off the floor for the mysterious opening above. For a moment, its scales gleamed dully in the light from the place where it had come from – green, a bright, malignant green that made Antares shudder in fascination – and then it was gone, its huge tail sliding out of sight.

After that, of course, the dream went back to being boring again, a string of senseless journeys, first through the strange halls he’d wandered through to meet the snake, and then up and into Hogwarts, and round and round and up until his dream self blundered into the Hospital Wing and slid into bed, and that was the end of it, and it was dark again.

When Antares opened his eyes again, he wondered wistfully if he was dreaming that strange dream again, and if there would be any leading four snakes to a big snake to hit them and pay them back. Then he tried to move, and grimaced against the pain – definitely no dream, then. It was dark around him, oddly – he wasn’t in the bed he’d seen himself slip into, and though it was stupid to expect that he would be, it still niggled at him. Antares tried to sit up slowly, and was hit with a horrid, stabbing pain in the side of his head for his – ha, ha, very funny – pains.

I wish I had my wand, he thought, not daring to grit his teeth against the pain for fear that that would hurt worse. *Maybe I'd be able to see where the sodding hell I am –*

The lights came on, then, and that *did* hurt worse. Antares tried to close his eyes, and had to stifle a scream – *oh, god, oh god, turn off, turn them off –*

“Are you *mad?*” someone shouted, echoing his feelings exactly. “Nox, NOX, you idiot!” The lights went off, and someone stamped into his room. “Malfoy? You stupid little maggot of an ingrate, get out, get out!” Someone squealed, and a door shut, and there was silence again. Antares let his eyelids relax, and couldn't bring himself to care when he started crying again. At least that didn't hurt –

The door opened again, and the shouter began to speak again. “Should've taken fifty points,” they muttered, coming closer and closer. Antares tried to shrink away out of habit, and whimpered in pain as he jarred something. “Don't move, you stupid boy –”

Antares nearly nodded before he caught himself. Then he realised who was talking to him and, now, fussing with his covers. “Pomf – ow –”

“And don't talk!” Pomfrey snapped. “At least this time I don't have to listen to fake excuses – god knows what you or Zabini would have called this –”

It was hard to keep himself from blinking, then, or trying to talk – “Mmmuf!” Antares said, helplessly, torn between wanting to find out what had happened to his friends and wanting to not feel that horrible ache again.

Somehow, Pomfrey seemed to understand what he wanted. “Oh, Zabini's just fine,” she said crossly. “As is that Davis girl – your friend as well, I take it? No, don't say anything,” she said, quickly. “I'd be stupid not to know, with how many times they've complained about not seeing you. *Wingardium Leviosa* – keep still, this won't take a minute.” Antares did so, despite the weirdness that was feeling himself being floated up into the air and rolled carefully around as Pomfrey tutted and scribbled.

"Honestly, the way these keep spreading is ridiculous," she muttered, turning him right side up again. "*Settle*," she said finally, and Antares sighed when he found himself being floated back down. "Well, you'll be fine by this evening. No, don't say anything – it's Sunday evening, Mr. Black. And I'd be very grateful to Marcus Flint if I were you; he brought you in Saturday night. Wouldn't say a word about what on earth happened, of course. *Slytherins*. I suppose I should be glad he brought you and your friends in at all." As Pomfrey paused to check his still slightly numb hands, Antares' heart sank at her words – that had to mean no one knew what those bastards had done to him. It wasn't fair, not fucking fair –

"Thank god your friends have their heads screwed on right," Pomfrey went on. "It was harder getting them to stop talking, frankly. Of course, your house master," she said, lingering over the words like they were poison, "insisted on Pensieve proof, though that didn't change a thing. I don't think I've ever been so glad to see the back of four students in my life. Don't even *think* about it, Black – shut up. Temporary suspension, is what Dumbledore called it." Moving away, she snorted. "I'd bet my wand he'll make it permanent within the day, for all that nonsense about having them on the premises. I still can't understand why Severus argued for that gesture – he must know Dumbledore won't be allowing them into Slytherin again until term end, at least. Or," Pomfrey continued, her tone turning grim, "at that's what he should be thinking. Hooligans, all four of them."

Antares murmured in heartfelt agreement, flinched as the pain hit, then finally settled down to listen to Madame Pomfrey mutter little comments about how she wished she could round up every professor in Hogwarts and give them a stern talking-to about the dangers of students lacking discipline and accountability. He wasn't quite sure when he fell asleep, but by the time he woke again, he was in the dream again.

And, as he looked around, someone was sitting on the bed opposite him – well, between him, rather, since his dream self had somehow decided to lie down in his bed and pretend to be asleep. Antares could barely make the intruder out in the dark, but could see enough to know that he had no idea who he was. Strange – was that a Slytherin crest on his tie? Baffled, Antares peered closer at the older

boy, wondering how on earth he'd never seen him with any of the other older years.

"Hello, Antares," the boy said, confusing him even further. "Feeling all right?"

"Do I know you?" Antares asked, after a pause. If this was a dream, well, then –

"Oh, I should think so, yes," the boy replied, smiling faintly. "We've spoken a lot, but never face to face."

Suddenly, the odd, formal way the boy spoke made something click together in Antares' head. "Wait...this is a dream, you can't –"

"Not quite a dream, unfortunately," the boy said, his smile widening. "Not quite." There – that infuriating repetition, it had to be –

But it couldn't. As far as Antares knew, diaries didn't, no, *couldn't* do astral projections –

"My diary's in your pocket, actually, so it's not that much of a strain," Tom said, leaning back a little. "Though I certainly wouldn't call it astral projection per se –"

"What are you doing here?" Antares asked, something a little like fear making his tone sharper than it should have been. "You shouldn't – even if you *can* project yourself from the diary, shouldn't it drain your resources? I mean, it's small –"

"Actually, that's not a problem," Tom said, shaking his head gently. "We'll get to why in a minute, don't worry. It's part of what I'm here to ask you, really –"

"I don't think –"

"You've got a choice to make, here," Tom went on, ignoring Antares' bewildered protest. "It's complicated, but we both know how well you do with complex things. Brilliantly well, really – rather like I did." The smile disappeared, a serious expression replacing it in a blur of motion that made Antares blink and realise –

"You're transparent," he said, wonderingly. "Why –"

"I'm sure it looks strange, but I doubt you'd want me to drain you more, just so you could feel like you weren't talking to a ghost –"

"Is that what you are?" Antares asked eagerly. "Can they do that? Put a ghost in, in an object? Like...wait." Antares drew in a sharp breath, repeating Tom's last few words in his mind. "Did you just say –"

"I'm getting to that," Tom said, shifting impatiently. Antares shivered, realising he could almost see the bed through him. "Like I said, you have a choice to make –"

"I don't see what that has to do with draining me," Antares said, narrowing his eyes at Tom. "That's what you said, isn't it?"

"I," Tom said, coolly, "am *getting* to that."

"Well get to it faster, then!"

Tom rolled his eyes, sighing impatiently. "You know, I'm being very pleasant about this," he said, through gritted teeth. "D'you think I'd give a toss if it wasn't you lending energy? But no, I'm actually trying. And the first thing you do is scoff – how do you think that makes me feel, Antares?" As Tom continued to speak, his voice became louder and louder, and he started to become less transparent.

And, as Tom solidified before him, Antares began to feel like he was shrinking down, into a small, more tired, more helpless version of himself. Suddenly, he noticed that he could still see his dream self on the bed Tom was sitting on, and that he was getting paler and paler –

"Oh, *now* you're quiet," Tom said contemptuously. "Typical, isn't it? You only shut up when you see the stakes are higher than you think." Then he sighed, exaggeratedly, and blinked slowly, as if to calm himself down. "But it's a shock. I understand that. Why don't we talk about that choice of yours, then? Get it out of the way?"

Antares gulped. "Sounds good." Tom's smile was frighteningly sly – almost a smirk, and one that said *I know what you're thinking*. Simple

words, really, though they seemed deadlier off a page and in the eyes of someone not quite a spectre, of someone who was draining him –

“Oh, don’t be paranoid,” Tom said, making a negligent gesture with one of his thankfully less-solid looking hands. “I wouldn’t be bothering if I didn’t think you could handle making the right choice.”

“Is that supposed to help?” Antares asked, in what was a rather less than scornful tone. He tried not to shiver as Tom gave him a long, hard look, and found he couldn’t repress a tiny sigh of relief when he just continued to speak.

“I’m more than pleased to help you sort out those bullies of yours, really,” Tom said, leaning forward. “Thing is, I can’t exactly do it if I haven’t drained you already.”

“Well, you could just tell me how to –”

“Oh, that,” Tom said, cutting into Antares’ shaky reply without a thought. “Make that ‘won’t’, then.”

“I thought you said you were offering me a choice!”

“And I am,” Tom said, shrugging slightly. “It’s either I drain you, or I drain someone else.”

“You mean it’s either I die, or I help you kill someone else,” Antares said bitterly, starting to shiver in earnest. “Unless the definition of ‘drain’ has changed in the past hour, I don’t think.”

“You know, for someone who constantly presents himself as smart, you’re being remarkably stupid,” Tom said, smiling mirthlessly. “If I were you, I’d try negotiating so that the person I drain is someone who you can stand to see go.”

“How the hell would that matter to me? I’d still have killed someone –”

“The word you’re looking for is betrayed,” Tom said, coolly. “I’d be doing the draining, obviously – as good as you think you are, I don’t see you draining someone of their life force even a tenth as well as I could –”

“And that’s a problem *how*?”

“Antares, you really are starting to try my patience with this ridiculous behaviour –”

“How is it ridiculous that I don’t want to kill anyone?” Antares shouted, starting to shake with panic at the look of annoyance on Tom’s face. “I don’t *do* things like that –”

“You killed those chickens,” Tom said, his tone horribly matter-of-fact. “Very efficiently, too. I’m assuming your mum taught you how...?”

“No,” Antares said, shaking his head in fearful disbelief. “No, that was the prankster –”

“Oh, I forgot – our little memory spell.” Tom smiled, as if at some secret joke. “I suppose you don’t need that right now –”

Antares reeled, covering his eyes in a futile bid to stop the pain. With it came memories, clear and sharp, of him *Obliviating* Blaise and Tracey as Tom looked on, of him breaking the neck of a struggling cockerel in the dark, biting his lip when he stained his robes with the blood, repeating that awful spreading spell over and over again until it took –

“You see,” Tom said quietly, as Antares bit down the nearly overpowering urge to scream, “don’t you? It’s a small switch, really, from animals to people. Seems big at first,” he said, nodding slightly, “when you start. But you see, after a while, that it’s not that different. Not that difficult. I know you, Antares – you’ll learn. You can learn anything, you know? Anything you put your mind to.” He paused, smiled. “Just like me.”

The scream came out then, floating on a torrent of rage, yanking Antares back into his body with a jolt. His eyes ached – everything did – and when he opened them, sobbing, Tom was still there, turning around to face him with an oddly pitying look on his face.

“You’ll get used to it,” Tom said, fading already. “I’ll make sure.”

Antares coughed, and flexed his hand, and found that he hadn't moved it. Indeed, he couldn't move anything – felt so heavy – so heavy –

Waking was nice. Like a dream, like the other one – the other one that had been green and exciting, and was now blurring horribly. Antares remembered Pomfrey's warnings from the last time he'd woken up just in time to stop himself from shrugging. Instead, he sighed. Something was telling him that it had been one of those ones you wanted to remember –

No use now, he supposed. All Antares could remember now was green, and how that had seemed exciting to him before was a mystery. Sighing, he decided to try opening his eyes, despite the pain – it would only hurt for a bit, really, and being unable to see where he was was starting to bother him –

Something shifted nearby, and Antares was already blinking and darting his gaze around before he even thought about it. There was no pain, thankfully. When he smiled in relief, foolishly, it didn't hurt. He blinked, hard, and tried to see more than a blurry, darkened little room, and didn't succeed, except when he squinted. The blur went away a little, then.

Just then, the door that had let in Pomfrey before let her in again. She, without a squint, was a blurred mass of familiar-looking shapes – *god, when do my eyes not fuck up nowadays* – and seemed to be standing at the door for no good –

"Is he awake?" someone asked softly, their blurred, irregular outline barely visible just inside the door.

"Ask him yourself," Pomfrey said briskly, heading in toward Antares. "See? Of course he is. I really don't understand how you feel just fine questioning *my* appraisals of his situation, and don't even say a peep when Severus says –"

"Poppy, please," the other person said, slowly following in her footsteps. Antares squinted at them, hard, then finally began to feel

nervous. What was Professor Dumbledore doing, visiting *him*? “Of course I trust your judgement. I simply wish to make certain –”

“Make certain away, then,” Pomfrey snapped. Antares coloured in shock – he didn’t think he’d ever heard someone be so rude to the Headmaster. Having abruptly changed direction and begun heading for the door, she actually went on. “Perhaps you don’t really need a qualified medical practitioner on these grounds, seeing as you and your housemasters are responsible enough to spot and deal with these little *accidents*.”

“Poppy –”

“I think I’ll just be along now,” Pomfrey said, her tone still hard. “Besides, his mother should be here for this, shouldn’t she?”

“Of course,” Dumbledore said – quickly, almost like he was embarrassed. Approaching, he waved a blurry hand and conjured a rather garish-looking armchair right beside Antares, close enough that he shifted slightly to the left, unable to stop himself from twitching. Something solid jabbed him horribly in the leg and fell noisily over the side of the bed just as Dumbledore sat down, making Antares redden further as he tried to sit up so he could see what it was. “Calm down, calm down, it’s not hurt,” Dumbledore said soothingly, waving the small book into Antares’ nervous hands. “Nothing torn, at least.”

“Yeah,” Antares muttered, staring at the logo and recognising the diary, which he couldn’t remember taking out of his pocket on the way back to Slytherin. He remembered making sure to keep it stuffed out of sight in his worn robes, in case anyone came up with the bright idea of stealing it, but certainly didn’t remember searching it out once he woke up in the Hospital wing, let alone putting it in his bed. Which left – “Did – could anyone have brought this...? I don’t quite –”

“Your mother came in to see you late last night,” Dumbledore said, settling back into his chair in a way that looked alarmingly like he was going to be there for a while. Antares gulped. “And, of course, so did your friends.” He peered curiously at the diary as Antares set it down by his pillow, but did not say anything more about it. Rather, as Antares sat up properly, he leant forward again. “You are all right, I take it? No strange pains...”

“No, sir,” Antares said, shaking his head for extra emphasis. He stopped, suddenly feeling dizzy, wrong –

“Mr. Black?”

“I’m, I’m fine,” Antares muttered, breathing deeply. The room came slightly into focus, and stopped its slow spin. “Just dizzy, a bit.”

“Poppy told me your eyes were affected by the attack,” Dumbledore said, blurry concern in his expression and tone almost reassuring. “I wished to know whether that was as a result of this most recent...attack, or –”

“Um,” Antares said, hesitantly, and was saved from saying more by the entrance of a grim-looking Pomfrey, followed by – “Mum!”

“Darling,” Bella said, crossing quickly to him. Her hug was tight, familiar safety – so good it almost hurt. Antares blinked fiercely and tried to listen to his mother’s disjointed, whispered rambling about how she should have written and tried and made them stop –

“Ahem,” Dumbledore said, politely. Definitely embarrassed, now. Antares did not turn his way; couldn’t, not with Bella’s arms tight enough about him to physically hurt. “Ms. Black –”

“Be quiet,” Bella snapped, her low tone sounding muffled, familiarly close by. “Let me have this, for god’s sake. For all I know, this is the last time I’ll see him unscarred.” An awkward silence ensued at that, in which the crackling of a fire Antares couldn’t see seemed to be the only real sound in the place. Then Bella straightened, slowly, her arms winding away from around him, and suddenly Dumbledore was asking Antares questions in a slow, odd voice that Antares couldn’t hear very well, no matter how hard he tried.

“Wells? I don’t –”

“Spells, Antares,” Bella said finally, interrupting Antares’ confusion. “Spells – the Headmaster wishes to know what spells were –”

“What they hit me with? Oh. Right.” Antares paused for a moment, trying to push down his embarrassment – words weren’t forming right

on his tongue, and the room was starting to spin gently again – “There was a ploro,” he eventually said, feeling stupid at how even Bella, now sitting beside Antares, had to lean forward to hear him. “It made me – erm –”

“I see,” Dumbledore said, his voice sounding far away. “And the others?”

“Obsaturo,” Antares said, after a hard think. “And Caligo.” Somehow, that second spell made him grit his teeth – Antares shook his head again, to get rid of the heavy feeling of anger, and tried to keep on. “One of – one of them said something about a coughing spell...?”

“That makes sense,” Pomfrey said, sounding thoughtful. “Certainly accounts for the lung damage...unless you believe their account, Albus?”

“Certainly not,” Dumbledore said, firmly. “Not at all, Poppy, not with the evidence –”

Bella’s hand, which had been squeezing Antares’ arm, stilled. “But without it, you might have believed them?”

“Ms. Black –”

“So *that’s* why they’re still on the grounds,” Bella muttered, standing abruptly. “Excuse me – thanks for calling me, Madame, but I just realised –”

“Ms. Black –”

“If you’ll wait just a moment, I’ll tell you where I’m going,” Bella said, turning to Dumbledore with an awful look on her face. “I believe you said my son’s bullies are still within the school...? Good. A visit will do them good.”

Dumbledore stood quickly. “Ms. Black, you cannot be meaning to –”

“Oh, I know you’ve protected their rooms,” Bella said coldly. “Be that as it may, I am determined to see them anyway.”

“I say again, you cannot be meaning to attack –”

“But most of all, I am quite puzzled,” Bella went on, ignoring Dumbledore as she began to move towards the door. “Really, I didn’t know what to think when I heard that my son’s bullies were protected by your spells. I really didn’t.” Bella’s voice, already angry, was starting to get louder with every word. “And as far as I’ve heard, you intend to continue protecting them until this – this case of aggression is solved. From what I’ve heard, you could have solved this ‘case’ almost a week ago. His housemaster knew who the bullies were, as did everyone in his house, and somehow that little fact escaped your notice...and here you are, extracting evidence from my son, as if you didn’t have the testimony of a confirmed Mediwitch to go on –”

“Ms. Black, the school board requires –”

“Then they should be brought to their senses!” Bella shouted. “If my son still has to see those little bastards even a day after this, Dumbledore, we are through. Maybe it’s time you started thinking just how badly I could raise him if I put my mind to it.”

Dumbledore sighed. “You’re not –”

“I don’t care,” Bella said, now moving back to Antares’ side with barely a glance in the Headmaster’s direction. “Madame, I believe you said something about my son needing his rest...?”

Antares had to strain to see Pomfrey’s expression, and what he could see of it didn’t bode well for Dumbledore. “Why, I believe I did,” she said, briskly. “Professor, I think you’ll have to come back later – Antares is due for some tests.”

A short pause later, Dumbledore sighed again. “I see,” was all he said, but the look he gave Pomfrey seemed to say a lot more – a lot more that Antares couldn’t quite understand. “Good day then, Mr. Black, Ms. Black.” He left then, seeming not to notice that Bella barely looked in his direction at that. As the door closed behind him, Madame Pomfrey sighed, and began to bustle about near what looked like some cupboards.

“What are the tests my son is due for?” Bella asked unsteadily. “I thought –”

“Just a quick look at his eyes, Ms. Black,” Pomfrey said, drawing closer. She paused for a moment, waving away the armchair Dumbledore had conjured with a disgusted snort, then directed Antares to hold his chin up and stare at her as she began the spell. “*Delibero sanitatis oculi*,” she said slowly, blinking a little. Antares, used to the way his face itched under the spell, did his best to keep still. It was strangely exhausting, and so he was glad to lean a little on Bella when the spell ended, and close his dry eyes. “Your new name suits you, you know,” Pomfrey said quietly, confusing him. “Well – not quite new, but –”

“I don’t care what you think,” Bella said, stroking Antares’ neck in a way that made him wriggle closer despite how stupid it probably looked. “But thank you, all the same.”

After that came sounds of Madame Pomfrey moving away and bustling around doing mediwitchy things, cut through with Bella’s comforting silence and occasional sighs. This time, Antares knew when he fell asleep – it was just as Bella had pressed the third (and longest, and therefore most embarrassing) kiss to his forehead. By then, he was already half lying down, and it was easy to let himself be gently pressed down into the soft pillows, and let sleep take away his confused thoughts.

Antares was let out – and led out – of the Hospital Wing half an hour after he woke up the next time, still confused, but feeling a lot less achy. It was nice to leave behind the discussion Pomfrey was having with his mother about the temporary stabilising spell she’d put on his eyes to make them better and actually enjoy the clear sight – a bit clearer than he was used to, actually, which probably meant Pomfrey’s horrid solution of glasses or corrective somethingy wasn’t half as daft as he’d thought. Bella had listened closely and took notes, which was probably the most alarming thing, but right now, just now, Antares decided he’d earned not having to think about it.

Blaise, who was happily leading the way to breakfast – no, lunch, that’s what he’d said – still had quite a nasty bruise on his arm from the fall the other day. “Of course I didn’t show it to her,” he’d said when asked just out of the Wing. “She’d have healed it, you idiot.”

“But shouldn’t you –”

“No way,” Blaise had insisted. “We had to have something to show people, you know – Tracey couldn’t manage to keep anything, but since I did, everyone knows what those seventh years are like.” He’d paused then, looking thoughtful. “You know, maybe if we’d left some of your bruises before –”

“Just don’t,” Antares had said, and somehow Blaise had listened. Looking at him now, it was hard to think why – Blaise looked embarrassed whenever Antares almost walked into something, but that didn’t stop him from telling him to piss off when he’d jokingly suggested that Blaise didn’t want to be seen with him. It was quite –

“Watch it,” Blaise said again, pulling on his arm so he didn’t quite knock into a fidgeting suit of armour as they turned a corner. “You know what the funniest thing is, though? Lockhart, yeah, *Lockhart* was spouting all sorts of crap to people about how if he’d been Head of House for Slytherin, he’d have sorted Avery and the rest within the first week of term.”

“He should try telling my mum that,” Antares said, shaking his head. “God, if you’d been there – she actually went out for Dumbledore, I swear to god –”

“And it’s taken you five minutes to actually – no, you idiot, go on, go on!”

“I think she threatened to do something to them,” Antares said, hesitantly. “I mean, she went on about why they were behind – behind spells while I wasn’t –”

“Good fucking question.”

“ – and god, Blaise, you should’ve seen it – Pomfrey sided with her! Well, sort of –”

“What d’you mean –”

“Sort of as in, I needed tests then,” Antares said, his tone becoming slightly smug as he remembered the tension in the room. “That eye spell, you know? The one that takes, like, one second?”

“Did he leave?”

“Hasn’t been back,” Antares said, nodding triumphantly. “I wonder if he went out for the school board, too, like she told him to –”

“Well, I dunno – Draco’s dad’s been around to his office, so I don’t know. He’s on the board, if you didn’t know, but...anyway. Although that was probably because Snape set Draco detention for the rest of the term after he tried to bother you in the wing –”

“Bother me?” Antares said, wonderingly. “I’m not sure I –”

“Pomfrey denounced him at breakfast, before Dumbledore’s speech,” Blaise said gleefully, eyes faraway. Well, that sounded like it would’ve been fun – “And oh, my god that speech –”

“Wait, go back to denouncing – what did she say about him?”

Blaise stopped short, stiffened and glared at Antares. “Henceforth,” he said angrily, in a sort of tinny imitation of Pomfrey’s scolding tone, “no Slytherin shall be admitted into the Hospital Wing without a real injury. You will ring the bell provided and wait for me to address you outside. Otherwise, none of you will be able to enter. I doubt that will stop you trying to keep other unfortunate souls from recovering, but there’s only so much a body can do...Professor? You were speaking?”

Antares blinked. “But she didn’t mention –”

“Everyone knew right away, though,” Blaise said, starting to walk again, a big grin having replaced the fake anger. “I mean, Slytherin was down loads of points Sunday morning, those four bastards get kicked out, everything’s quiet...until Slytherin loses twenty more points Sunday evening. That night, Snape puts a tracking charm on Draco in front of everyone in the common room after supper and

gives him detention for the term. Not hard for everyone to put it together, don't you think? What Pomfrey said just sealed the deal."

Antares tried not to smile too hard. "Tell me no one's talking to him..."

"No one is *looking* at him," Blaise said, his grin getting wider. "It's like – you know, like heaven. Watch it, there," he said, pulling preventing Antares from entering the stairwell they'd come up to. "We need to find a moving one, I think – can't imagine you making all these –"

Antares jumped as the stairs before them creaked into motion, and forgot to be embarrassed when he saw the wary shock on Blaise's face. "That is creepy, right?"

"Convenient, really," Blaise said, steering him gently onto the staircase, "but very, very creepy, yeah."

"So, uh," Antares said, trying not to think about whether the castle or the stairs or the walls were alive, or if someone – *right, stop thinking about it* – "that speech?"

Blaise looked like he was trying to do the same. "What?"

"The speech," Antares said, over the creaking of the stairs. "Dumbledore's speech –"

"Right," Blaise said, straightening happily. "Now, I can't remember everything –"

"About half will be fine," Antares said, smiling. "I mean, I think this thing's getting faster, so you won't have time to finish..."

"Let me bloody start, will you?"

By the time they got to the Great Hall, it was half empty, and neither Professor Dumbledore nor Madame Pomfrey was there to see how red Antares' face was after hearing the whole speech. Blaise, of course, hadn't forgotten the most embarrassing bits – that is, the ones that referred to Antares' brave defence of his friends in the face of danger, or rot like that – and the way he'd told Antares to shut up

when he'd called it rot had felt a little too serious to mean anything other than Blaise thinking it was true.

Antares reddened further, just thinking about it – looking back on the whole awful thing, it had been stupid to assume Edmund Yaxley wouldn't have had anything to say about how Antares had wiped him in tryouts. It was even more stupid to have gone around grinning and joking about it with his friends. However hard he tried to turn it in his mind, though, he couldn't think it stupid to have tried to fight back – at least they hadn't done anything to Blaise, or Tracey, that they might have been planning to out of spite.

Or maybe not. Either way, Antares was glad that none of the teachers there at the high table were giving him embarrassing looks, like the Headmaster or Pomfrey possibly just might have. It didn't stop everyone else from eyeballing him, but well, you couldn't have everything.

"Where's Tracey?" he asked, just for something to say as they sat down at the nearly empty Slytherin table.

"She's fine, you know," Blaise said, giving him a meaningful look. Antares almost scowled – that was obvious, with her not being in the Hospital Wing with him, wasn't it? But – "She says she'll thank you in History of Magic – Binns hasn't been teaching all day, for some reason, or at least that's what we heard..."

"Hey, Blaise, look out," Antares said, quietly. "That's Draco's –"

"Yeah," Blaise said, just as quietly. "That's him." Antares stared at Lucius Malfoy as he closed the door behind him and Dumbledore, smiling – wasn't that that little room behind the Hall? He remembered speaking to the Headmaster in there, once, last year. It hadn't been very fun – certainly not fun enough to make Mr. Malfoy smile like that as Dumbledore spoke quietly to him just in front of the door, ignoring the way the whispers got louder at all the tables. "Do you think..."

"I really hope they're expelled," was all Antares could say, watching Mr. Malfoy shake Dumbledore's hand and begin to walk in his and Blaise's direction, still smiling. Antares looked down as the man

swished by expensively, wondering why he wasn't more angry to see him strutting about while Bella –

“Bastard,” Blaise muttered, sounding appropriately angry. “You know what? I bet he got Dumbledore to cancel Draco's detentions in payment, if he's expelling Avery and that lot –”

“Yeah,” Antares said, pushing at his food. “Bastard.”

The day whirled by after lunch, blurring occasionally when Antares cast too strong a colouring charm during his free period with Tracey and Blaise. He shared his game of seeing just how many charms you could put on a bit of parchment before it began to smoke with them all too happily, and laughed when Tracey, no longer annoyingly grateful, complained that he was cheating.

“All in the layering,” he'd said, smirking. “And don't put a colour on right after making it fly – those charms don't hold well together done in that order.”

Just now, he could almost see Tracey rolling her eyes. “Says you,” she'd said, doing it anyway. The parchment exploded after the third colouring charm, and Antares had laughed so hard he'd thought he would die.

Funny. Wasn't he dying now?

He didn't remember how he'd gotten here, and that struck him as bad, but not as bad as the fact that he couldn't stand any more, and that everything around him was starting to dim. As he sunk down against the wall, something heavy seemed to slither by behind him. Slither, heavy –

“Don't worry,” someone said kindly. “I'll finish this myself.” Antares felt himself stir, and put a stop to it right away, wheezing. “When I'm done, go back to your dorm.”

“Done?” was all Antares felt he could safely manage. He was wrong. “Doing what?”

The person chuckled – something about it seemed – “Four snakes, Antares,” they said, smiling. Antares wanted to shake his head – *how the fuck can I tell that he’s* – “You don’t remember, of course. No matter...”

For a moment, Antares jolted to his senses. *I know who says that*, something screamed in him. *Stop them, stop it* –

“Now calm down,” the boy was saying. *It’s him*, someone else was sobbing to Antares, in his ear, *it’s him, he’ll kill them* – “Oh, come in, if you’re so worried –”

For a moment, someone screamed. They stopped, then Antares got to his feet, and opened a door, and found himself inside a room with four beds, four inhabitants, two sitting up, staring at him –

The boy beside him was so pale, almost like a ghost – “See? All you need to do is use a mirror.”

One of the boys on the beds reached for something, and instinctively Antares opened his mouth and hissed, *come forth*, and the air seemed to shimmer around them – “*Specularis*,” he found himself saying, turning the walls shiny. *Why is my wand in my hand?* Antares wondered, a moment later, over the taunts that the boy who had been reaching was saying. He remembered suddenly, and laughed. “Wakey wakey, you bastards – open your eyes...”

Something broke in a corner of the room, and green began to fracture the world around them –

Antares woke up shivering.

It took a long minute for him to reassure himself that he was in his bed, in his dorm, away from wherever – wherever he’d thought. He still shivered, remembering green. Green, green scales, bright eyes...

It took even longer for him to realise he was crying, and didn’t know why. Antares, mortified, tried to keep it silent. What on earth was he coming to, that the colour currently surrounding him in the darkness could scare the shit out of him merely by appearing in a dream?

It wasn't that colour, the crying part of him insisted. *It was like poison*
—

“Shut up,” Antares said, quickly. He tried not to think about what it meant to be talking to your- fine, so he did. So he was mad, or getting there – so what? He sighed. *At least I'm not crying anymore* –

“Are you okay?” Blaise's sharp question made Antares jump...in his seat? How did –

“Leave him alone,” Tracey said, across from him. They were at the table, at breakfast, in the Great Hall – Antares frowned. *Is this a dream, or am I* – “...can't blame him. Must've been a bloody shock for whoever found them first.”

“I know,” Blaise said. “Does anyone know what happened...?”

“Daphne told me Hannah Abbot says they're dead, but I don't think so,” Tracey went on. Antares stiffened. Something about this conversation – “I mean, why would Madame Pomfrey keep them in the Hospital Wing if they weren't?”

“Bet it's that prankster,” someone said, from behind Antares. He turned to see a slightly sheepish-looking Terry Boot fidgeting behind him. “Snape didn't catch him, did he?”

“Who says it's a he?” Blaise said contemptuously, as if the very idea was beneath him. When Terry reddened, he only glared harder at him. “Well, who? I think that's a –”

“It could be anyone,” Antares said quickly, giving Blaise a ‘calm down’ look, though he wasn't sure why he did so. Terry looked even more embarrassed at that, if it was possible, and it struck Antares then that he should probably be angry that Terry'd never once asked if the rumours about him and Bella were true. That he and the equally blushing Anthony Goldstein had just gone along with everyone else and believed it all. Antares shrugged, helplessly, wondering how he could take it so calmly, and repeated himself despite his confusion. “I mean, it really could. Could be you, couldn't it?”

“Me?” Terry spluttered. “No way – the spells for petrification like *that* are like, sixth year –”

“Petri-what?” Blaise said scornfully, but not quite as scornfully as he could have.

“That’s what happened to them,” said Anthony, authoritatively. “At least I heard so from my sister –”

“Yeah, and it’s right hard to do,” Terry added, nodding sharply. “She said you had to –”

“Yeah, whatever,” Blaise said, standing up. “Come on, Antares, we’ll be late for Transfig.”

“Yeah,” Antares said slowly, not quite feeling sorry for the beet-faced Terry and Anthony, but... “Yeah, let’s go.”

“Wait for me,” Tracey called out, from behind them. “Just a second –”

“Pig,” Blaise said, rolling his eyes when he saw why she’d waited. “Tracey, lunch is only in a few hours –”

“Says the man who’s going to try – and fail, remember that – to steal some of my croissants when I’m not looking,” Tracey said smugly. She grinned at Antares as they pushed through the surge of students leaving the Hall, and waved half of one buttered one at him. “Want some?”

“Why does he get offered some instead of me?”

“Because *he*,” Tracey said, batting away Blaise’s unhappy hands and handing the warm croissant half to Antares, “was too busy feeling guilty to eat.”

“I wasn’t –”

“Look, Antares, it’s perfectly okay if that prankster or whoever it was got revenge for you,” Tracey said, interrupting him with a wave of the other half. “Really – wish I’d thought of it. Can you imagine how mad they’ll be when they wake up?”

“Yeah,” Antares said, smiling a little. Somehow, that did make him feel a little better. “I can imagine, yeah.”

And really, he could. Yaxley’s face would be red – maybe even redder than it had been the last time Antares had snatched the Snitch before he even saw it, and the Rookwoods would glare at him in that stupid dark way of theirs, stupid because even after this, they couldn’t touch him. And Avery – well. She’d bite her lip and sneer, and that would be the end of it.

Antares almost laughed, he felt so happy. He couldn’t though, since he was still sort of chewing on the croissant, which really didn’t taste as good as it smelt –

The world bent around him, hard, and he fell.

Antares, waking to unfortunately familiar stone walls, sighed. As far as he could see, Pomfrey was nowhere to be seen, and –

Who was the boy sitting at the foot of his bed? Tap, tap, he flexed his foot, and suddenly Antares found himself on his back again, wheezing, when he’d barely realised he was starting to sit up.

“Any moment now,” the boy said, nodding. “Good work with those snakes, no?”

“Who are you?” Antares tried to say. Nothing came out.

“Oh, sorry,” the boy said, standing. “I suppose this isn’t the best time –”

“Mr. Black,” Pomfrey said through the door, footsteps announcing that she might soon be walking in, “if I enter that room to see you up on your feet, you will be *sorry*.”

“See you in a minute,” the boy said, walking close, shrinking. Antares tried to move, tried to peer over the side of the bed to see, but there was only his schoolbag there, and Pomfrey –

“Sit back, for the love of Merlin!” – was staring at him like he was crazy. “I don’t suppose it’s any surprise that you fainted, if you carry on exerting yourself in this way –”

“I’m sorry,” Antares said, confused, trying not to stare at his bag. Where had –?

Pomfrey sighed as she closed the door behind her. “I suppose you can’t help it,” she muttered, wrenching open the cupboard before her a little harder than was needed. “It’s in your blood to be difficult, you Blacks. Why, when your mother was here...” she shook her head. “Horrible trouble to treat, that girl. Awful troublemaker too, to boot.” She finally fished a glass jug of frothing liquid out of the cupboard, tapped it hard, then floated it over to Antares along with an ornate glass cup he hadn’t noticed was on the table beside him. “No idea why you’re more sensible than she was,” she said, closing the cupboard with a sigh. “These things usually get worse every generation – especially considering your father, you probably should...hmm.” Pomfrey tapped her wand against her shoulder, looking thoughtful. “Pour yourself a half – no, a cupful of that – a full cup, mind you – and drink it down.”

The jug was lighter than it looked, and actually floated itself to the bedside table once he was done, the bright liquid inside it frothing away. Antares stared dubiously at the very still quantity in the cup, then took a sip.

Merlin, but it burned.

“Drink it down, Mr. Black,” Pomfrey said, as if she could sense Antares wondering how to pour it somewhere and still make it look like he’d – “I mean it, young man. You were absolutely exhausted when your friends brought you in, and the more you drink of that Reviving potion, the less likely you’ll be here all night.” She flicked her wand, and caught the jug as it zoomed toward her without spilling a drop. “Take your time if you like, but I’ve always found that it’s best to be done with it in one gulp.”

Grimacing, Antares decided to take her advice. If he had to sip down that – that stuff, slowly, he’d probably just spill it on himself ‘by mistake’.

“Don’t spill any, please,” Pomfrey said, as if she could read his mind. “It tends to burn rather quickly.”

“And yet you want me to drink this?” Antares asked bitterly. He sighed, steeling himself after a moment of pointed silence from Madame Pomfrey’s direction. Better now than later, right?

Wrong. He coughed hard, afterwards, and had to blink away the water in his eyes, but he got it down all in one go, somehow. Feeling something cold splash on him, he realised the cup was now full of water, and drank it down thankfully, and tried not to look too gratefully at Pomfrey, who was stowing away the jug with a thoughtful look on her face.

“Try getting out of bed,” she said, after closing the cupboard. Antares, shaking, found that he could – found, in fact, that he wanted to. He blinked again, fidgeted, and wondered what the fuck had been in the potion. He felt so alive, now, that it – “Better?”

“Definitely,” Antares said, scratching his head. “That’s – that’s a good sign, right? It feels like one.”

Pomfrey, instead of wryly agreeing and shooing him out, just frowned instead. “I suppose so,” she said, slowly. “But perhaps I should –”

“What time is it?” Antares said desperately, interrupting her. He wasn’t sure he could stand to spend another *minute* in the Hospital Wing – “It’s just – I’m sort of hungry –”

“Yes,” Pomfrey said, her expression turning steely. “Not eating breakfast will do that to you, won’t it?”

“Um,” Antares said guiltily. Crap – if there was ever a disadvantage to having friends that cared enough to drag you up to the Hospital Wing when you passed out, it was them constantly tattling about your every mistake when you did. “I did eat some bread.”

“I suppose you also ate ‘some bread’ last night, too,” Pomfrey said, shaking her head in disgust. “Get out of my ward, you silly boy. And see you go straight down to the Great Hall and eat a good lunch – I’ll be there in a moment, and don’t think I won’t see if you don’t –”

Antares didn't need to be told twice. "Thank you, Madame Pomfrey!" he called behind him, darting into the main ward without a backward glance. He stopped short almost immediately, speechless.

Petrified is a good word, he thought stupidly, staring at the four stiff students on his left, their stiff features eerie even in the daylight pouring into the windows behind them. Two of them were fixed in a sitting position, one twisting away from something with such a look of fear on his face that it gave Antares pause. After a moment, he made himself walk past, trying to feel happy again, that his bullies had gotten their comeuppance.

Somehow, he couldn't. It bothered him all the way down to the Great Hall, though he was there so fast that it was unreal, having run half the way, feeling restless. Blaise and Tracey looked surprised as he slid onto the bench between them, jostling them in the process, but he didn't care. The blood was humming in his veins, and he felt like going outside and flying, like doing *something*, so much that jostling his friends at the table and grinning at their surprise felt like a poor substitute.

"You're not Antares, are you?" Tracey said accusingly, narrowing her eyes at him. "He doesn't smile like that anymore –"

"Or burst into the Great Hall like the doors were on fire," Blaise continued, elbowing him gently in the side. "What on earth did she give you?"

"Reviving potion is what she called it," Antares said, already beginning to pile his plate with food. God but he was hungry – looking at the mashed potatoes and enticing pork chops nearby, he felt like he hadn't eaten in *days*. "It burned like holy fuck going down, so it's not something I'd do everyday."

"Imagine, though – you could stay up all night before exams and just drink it down, and you'd be fantastic the rest of the day."

"Yeah, but Blaise, when I say it burned, I mean *it burned* –"

"Isn't that Draco's dad again?" Tracey said, poking Antares excitedly. "Hey, Draco! Daddy dearest's here, go hug him –"

“Lay off, Davis,” Greg said from nearby, but Draco, rising from his seat, looked like he hadn’t been listening in the first place. Tracey chortled as he slipped off the bench and stumbled his way to his father, looking about as relieved as Mr. Malfoy looked uneasy. Which was odd, Antares thought, cocking his head at them. Surely Draco hadn’t done anything new to get himself in trouble –

“I wonder why he’s here again,” Daphne said from opposite Antares, startling him from his thoughts. “I mean, it only got in the Prophet today that Avery and that lot were going to be expelled, so I don’t see how he knows –”

“Expelled?” Antares said, surprised. “I thought they were only being suspended, though.”

“Dumbledore announced it earlier on, before you came in,” Blaise said, sounding satisfied. “I mean, rum lot for them, being Petrified and everything, but still. They bloody deserve it.”

“How can you say that?” Daphne said, sounding taken aback. “I’ve heard they won’t wake up for months unless their parents can get grown mandrakes in somehow –”

“Mandr – they don’t need mandrakes for anything, Daphne, they’re *Petrified* –”

“Yes they do! I was talking to Professor Sprout on Monday, and she was worried that the cold snap would kill the crop we’ve got in the greenhouse,” Daphne said crossly, giving Blaise a glare. “You always act like I’m so stupid –”

“Well maybe it’s because –”

“Shut up, you,” Tracey said, reaching around Antares to shove Blaise in the shoulder. “Daphne, you were saying?”

“Traitor,” Blaise said, sticking out his tongue at Daphne as she opened her mouth to speak. “That Charms assignment you wanted help with, Tracey? Forget it.”

“I’ll just get Antares to help me,” she said, shrugging. “Won’t you, Antares?”

“I haven’t heard a word anyone said in the last five minutes,” he said immediately, winking at Daphne. “I think you were saying something about Avery being expelled, right, Daphne?”

Blaise snorted. “Yeah right, traitor the second –”

“Can’t talk, mouth full,” Antares said, chewing a nearly nonexistent mouthful of food. “It’s rude, didn’t your mum tell you that?”

“Wanker,” was all Blaise said, rolling his eyes. And that was almost the only thing he said to Antares after that, even during Charms, which followed right after lunch. Occasionally, he substituted ‘wanker’ with ‘traitor’, especially when Antares failed to look less than interested in Daphne’s whispered conversation with Tracey about the mandrakes, but started talking to Antares in earnest towards the end, when Flitwick sent them out early, only for them to meet an irritatingly jovial-looking Lockhart just outside the classroom.

Thankfully, Lockhart didn’t seem to be interested in trying to hound Antares for no good reason just then – he barely seemed to notice the students, really, and disappeared into Flitwick’s classroom and shut the door firmly behind him as soon as Hannah Abbot, usually the last out, had stepped out looking as unhappy as usual.

“Poor Flitwick,” Blaise said, shaking his head. “What do you think –”

But his question was rendered useless almost immediately, when Flitwick and Lockhart emerged from the classroom, both looking serious. Or, at least, Flitwick looking serious, and Lockhart only looking less happy than usual.

“Get on with you, you lot,” Flitwick said good-naturedly. “Oh, and Black? Staff meeting, so no Apprentice class for today.”

“Pity,” Antares found himself saying. “I could’ve used one today – I think we were doing some Charm theory –”

“Oh, so you’re feeling better, then?” Flitwick asked, making him start a little when he realised the professor was still listening. In fact, the professor had paused and, despite Lockhart’s stupidly obvious nudges, was giving Antares an uncomfortable once-over. “Try not to get in any more trouble, Black.”

“Er, yeah,” was all Antares could think to say, before Flitwick turned away. He stared at the man’s round profile as he and Lockhart went off towards the nearest stairwell and disappeared around a corner, wondering if the fact that Professor Flitwick had actually looked him in the eye just then should make him feel better. It did, somehow, but not all the way down. Which was strange, considering his reaction before to Terry and Anthony, when *they* had –

“Wakey wakey,” Blaise was saying sarcastically, snapping a finger near his ear. “Don’t suppose that potion could’ve done away with the staring into space –”

Antares shook his head, forcing himself to remain calm. What was it about those words, stupid, silly words, that had just sent a jolt of fear into his heart? Or maybe it had been the snapping finger –

“Antares, come *on* –”

“Is there a loo near here?” was all Antares could think. He felt sick, now, horribly so. “I – I think I’m going to –”

“Don’t you dare fall on us again, Antares,” Tracey said from nearby. Someone – probably her – grabbed his arm and began to lead him to the right, in the opposite direction of where everyone else had been heading. “Oh move on, you idiots, this isn’t a circus –”

“Quiet and let me think,” Blaise snapped, grabbing hold of Antares’ other arm as his head began to dip down of its own accord. “Come on, come on, I know there’s a loo on this floor – look, Antares, it’s round the corner, just hold on –”

Antares held, but didn’t know what he was holding. Himself, maybe?

Wakey wakey –

He began to shiver, and felt guilty that his friends fell silent, and only increased their efforts to drag him toward the toilet. He could see the door ahead, now – he closed his eyes, and suddenly they were inside, and he felt an urge to laugh. “You shouldn’t be in here,” he muttered. “Tracey –”

“Get his bag, I think he dropped it,” Blaise said, ignoring him. “Go on, I’ll handle him –”

Antares coughed, felt himself fall, and wanted to laugh when he felt himself hit something and begin to slide down. Just like that –

No, that was a dream, only a dream –

“Antares, I can’t hold you up forever,” Blaise said crossly. “Just – get on your feet, on your feet, that’s it. Just lean over there, that’s good –”

Wakey wakey –

“Are you listening to me?” Blaise was saying, sounding oddly distant. “Shit. Just – just stay there, I’ll go get Tracey –”

Wakey wakey –

“I’ll just be a second, all right?” Blaise rushed away, slamming the door to the toilets behind him. It closed with an odd thunk, and suddenly the boy was there again, walking toward him. Antares slumped over the toilet bowl in the stall, unable to care that he was now kneeling on the floor. The stall door shut behind him, and suddenly he was looking at black shoes, black trousers –

Tom.

“Sorry I did that,” he said, leaning back against the wall of the stall, looking unconcerned. “You weren’t taking it as well as I thought, so I thought I’d just –”

“Fuck around with my memory?” Antares rasped. He tried not to remember laughing as Yaxley screamed when the snake had come in. It didn’t work. “Why?”

“Why...?” Tom said, sounding incredulous. “Because you don’t leave enemies behind. Not alive, anyway.”

“But they’re –”

“That was your fault, though, wasn’t it? Still,” Tom said, a thoughtful expression sliding onto his face, “I suppose we could kill the mandrakes. That’d keep us safe for months extra, I think, and it’d only be a simple frost spell –”

“I am done,” Antares said, with great difficulty, “with killing things.”

Tom smiled at him. “You’re done when I say you’re done,” he said, calmly. “Or did you think that great fat snake came from nowhere? You owe me.”

“I don’t owe you –”

“And if you don’t pay me back, our little memory spell will kill you,” Tom continued, as if he hadn’t heard Antares’ shaky protest. “The Sharing spell’s a little touchy like that. But you know that already, don’t you?” His smile grew a little wider. “Next time, when someone tells you to read up on a spell, do it. Although I doubt you’ll have that problem with me, from now on. Will you?”

Antares gulped. It hurt.

Tom leant closer. “Now, I’ve made this really quite simple. In a minute –” he broke off, looking at the door to the stall, clearly able to hear Blaise pounding on the toilet door outside. “Well. Like I said, you owe me. And you will pay that debt exactly as I wish.” He looked back at Antares, green eyes intent. “Got it?” He faded, so quickly and so suddenly that Antares started in spite of himself, in spite of the shaking in his knees.

“Antares, what in the fucking hell –”

I’ve made this simple for you, Antares, Tom’s voice said, cutting across the sound of Blaise’s desperate pounding. *Get up.* To his horror, Antares found himself doing so. Opening the door of the toilet stall. Walking towards – *All you have to do is let him in, all right?*

“ – *let me in, you berk!*”

Antares was at the door, and his wand was in his hand, though it was shaking. See, Tom said, as he made Antares mouth a spell he almost did not hear, as the door handle began to turn properly, *it's easy*.

“Finally!” The door began to open, impatiently, and Antares could feel himself sinking already, and Tom was already –

At the door.

He stumbled forward, slamming himself against it even as his legs failed him. “Run,” he tried to call, but already he could feel Tom's cold fingers, half-solid, wrenching at his shoulder –

I won't move, he told himself, letting himself go limp. *You can't move me* –

Tom laughed loudly, and it pierced him. “It'll be easy once you're dead,” he said, smirking. “He'll even help me – feel that?” Antares could. Blaise was pounding again, shoving at the door so it thumped into him, started to even shift him – “I wish you could watch. Obviously, you can't have everything...”

Antares closed his eyes in defeat, but pushed himself back, against the door. There was no warning – the pain –

The world exploded. Colours sparked to life behind his eyelids, and Antares felt himself convulse, really felt it, every single pulse and shake and shiver, the floor beneath him cold, the air sharp, and he marvelled that he'd not noticed the strange lack of feeling long before, long before –

The convulsions stopped, and something burst in his pocket, wet. Before Antares could wonder if it was some kind of vein or something, a scream set up, piercing, stabbing through his head like nothing else.

Probably me, he thought, suddenly dull and lifeless again. *I'm sorry* –

It all abruptly stopped. Everything – the pain, the screaming –

The door banged open, jarring Antares down to his very toes as it shoved him aside, letting Blaise run in, feet frantic –

It wasn't until Blaise had found him and called him a bastard five times over that he realised he wasn't dead.

"Am I a ghost?" Antares tried to ask, but all that came out was a gurgle.

"What the fuck did you do to him, Blaise?" Tracey shouted, barging in, schoolbag obviously forgotten. "Look at him –"

"I can see him, all right?" Blaise yelled back, kneeling in front of him so he couldn't quite see the horror on Tracey's face. "Antares –"

"Where's Tom?" he finally got out, coughing. Blaise ignored him, shutting the door, conferring with Tracey and then putting hands under and above and trying to get him to his feet – "Where?"

"Maybe just one of us should go to Pomfrey," Blaise said shakily. "I don't know if we can make it without –"

"Oh, so you can bang into him with a door again?" Tracey spat, rising to her feet.

"I didn't do it on purpose!"

"Wait," Tracey said, suddenly leaning close. "Help me turn him over."

"Shouldn't we –"

"Shut up and help me!" Antares felt the world twist as they did that, and couldn't stifle a whimper at the pain – "He's bleeding, Blaise."

"But that's not blood –"

"Do you really want to argue about this? Just *go* –"

It worried Antares that Blaise had no answer to that, and worried him even more to hear the hurtful thumps of Blaise's feet as he ran off. Like he should have run before –

“No you don’t,” Tracey said desperately, shaking his shoulder. “You keep your eyes open, understand?”

“M’not bleeding,” Antares forced out, as it hit him. What was in his pocket? Or no – what was – who? Pockets –

“Open your eyes, Antares –”

“S’Tom,” he slurred, no longer able to pay attention, not when his head felt so empty, when he could reach inside and touch his memories, all of them – “S bleeding –”

“Open your eyes!”

When the darkness took him, he smiled. From the way Tracey was shaking him, though, he didn’t think she found it quite as funny. *Look who’s dead now*, Antares wanted to say, to Tom.

Well, not really. But close enough.

A/N: I can’t believe I’ve finally got to the fecking point, here. Hopefully you enjoyed reading this chapter more than I enjoyed writing it – at times, it was like pulling very healthy teeth. Mostly at the beginning, but still. As for chapter count – well, well, well, only about two more to go, if the story doesn’t throw me any more curve balls. Again, review as you like.

Chapter 10: Winding Up

Bella started awake. It was fairly dark in the living room, despite the fact that she'd left the curtains open just before dropping off on the couch. The bloody fire had gone out again, so it was cold too, enough that she shivered and groped for her wand— a simple warming charm would fix things quickly, and get her up and working again on the sample gown for Mrs. Bernard. Bella smiled at the memory of her interview with the woman, both of them tucked away behind the main counter at Gladrags, Mrs. Bernard's many questions about this or that set of robes continually interrupted by customers coming up to ask frivolous questions and nod hesitantly at Bella when they were introduced.

It had surprised Bella how many people she knew from her days at Malkin's had recognised her. Once she'd had time to look back and count, Bella had been shocked at how how many of those who *had* recognised her voice had deigned to remember her, really— she'd necessarily never been as chatty as the other girls at Malkin's, and had made sure she dealt with clients only through Madame Malkin, disdaining the direct patronage the other girls had lusted after.

Bella's smile became a grin as she rose, having found her wand on the coffee table nearby. The unexpected customer attention certainly hadn't seemed to surprise Mrs. Bernard. The woman was either the most unflappably patient person Bella had ever known, or had orchestrated the interview to draw attention from her customers on purpose. From the satisfaction in her eyes as she'd shaken Bella's hand at the end, it was probably the latter.

Only one way to find out, Bella thought, eyeing the soft gown on the crudely transfigured mannequin not two feet away. Looking at it now, she decided against doing much more than checking hems and seams and adding the necessary charms— in the dark of the room, it looked magnificent, almost too magnificent to be the pretty evening garment Mrs. Bernard had asked for. Bella gazed at it for a long moment, then, shivering, remembered the warming charm she'd promised herself.

She raised her wand, a *Calefacio* on her lips, then decided against it. “*Incendio*,” she said instead, pointing vaguely at the wood left in the fireplace. This way, the whole room would warm, and she’d have the fire ready for her when she was ready to Floo the dress over to Gladrags. Moving toward the mannequin, Bella flicked her wand aimlessly. *Front panel looks fine, I think. Just a little dull, though—perhaps a few sequins on that seam?*

“*Accio* sequins,” Bella said, flicking her wand just a little. When none appeared in her little floating sewing-case, she focused for a moment and repeated the spell. A nice little handful appeared in the right compartment, putting a grim little smile on her face. She’d be damned if she’d spend money on buying materials to help her get a new job when perfectly suitable ones sat idle at Madame Malkin’s. “*Accio* thread.”

Just as a nice little spool appeared in another compartment, the fire roared behind Bella, startling her. She glanced at it, wondering, and shivered when she saw it was green. *Not again—*

Severus’ face appeared, stretched with worry, and Bella distantly felt the spool of thread that had been in her hands drop uselessly to the floor.

“What—”

“Come through,” was the first thing he said, interrupting her mercilessly. “Just come through— I’ll hold the connection open for you.”

“It’s not Antares, is it?” Bella asked, feeling her hands begin to shake. “Can’t be. I just—”

“Come through,” Severus repeated, the look in his eyes telling her that it was Antares, again. Again, despite how he’d seemed fine, how Pomfrey had told her that the Reviving Potion would help his low energy, how— “Bella, are you listening?”

“I’m coming,” she snapped, floating the spool of thread into her sewing-case and causing the case to drop onto the coffee table. “I’m coming, all right? Just hold it open.” A look of hurt passed quickly

across his face, making Bella feel guilty as his head disappeared from the flames, replaced immediately by his familiar, smooth hand. It couldn't be Severus' fault that so much was happening to Antares this term, and it wasn't right that she take out her fear and frustration on him. Hadn't she forgiven his reticence about the bullying? Hadn't she?

Severus' proffered hand flexed, opening and closing impatiently, and Bella tucked her wand away and took hold of it, closing her eyes as she stepped into the connection, holding firm against the dizziness that threatened to overtake her.

"I didn't wake you up," Severus said, holding on to her hand a little longer than was strictly necessary, and Bella told herself she had forgiven him. How could she not? "Good," he said, letting go as she shook her head. "Antares fainted in one of the boys' toilets on the first floor, so—"

"What about the Reviving potion?" Bella asked, trying to think back to the little she could remember about its effects. "Shouldn't it have kept him from fainting again? Was something wrong with it, or—"

"As far as Pomfrey can tell, his condition is not a result of the Reviving—"

"Condition?" Bella asked, fear catching hold of her again. "What do you mean? When did he faint? Shouldn't he have woken up by now?"

"Bella, please stay calm—"

"Don't tell me to stay calm! Is he awake, Severus? Answer me!"

The pause was really all the answer she needed. "Bella—"

Hands shaking, Bella pushed past Severus, ignoring his slow, hesitant words as she burst out of Madame Pomfrey's office and into the main ward of the hospital wing. She only paused for a moment to survey the half-full ward, looking over each of the four curiously stiff children. They were placed side by side along the wall on her left. None of them was Antares.

Bella moved on, sensing Severus behind her as she made her way to a familiar-looking door in the middle of the wall at the end of the ward. *Spell-made*, she noted now, just as she had noted before through her shock and anger at the news of Antares' injuries. The door shivered open at her touch.

"—need him to get a hold of Zabini and Davis," Dumbledore was saying. "They must know why he was carrying at least a few of these things—"

"Albus, Ms. Black is here," Severus called from behind Bella. As she entered the private little room, she ignored him, ignored Dumbledore, ignored Pomfrey—there he was. Her son.

Bella bit her lip and forced the tears back, trying to keep calm. It was hard to do that and look at Antares. He was so pale, so pale, and had only the faintest touch of colour in his cheeks, and so still—

Dumbledore cleared his throat, meaningfully. "Ms. Black—"

"When he wakes up, I'm taking him with me," she said, by way of answer. Bella knelt by Antares' side in the pause that followed, and gently reached out and ran her fingers through his grimy hair. "He's not coming back here."

"Ms. Black," Dumbledore said again, more firmly. She looked up at his old face and saw weariness. Worse still, she saw disappointment. "Your son may not wake," he said, but she had already seen it, in his calm, weary eyes – "I am sorry."

Bella turned away from him and his disbelief, and her eyes fell on a crisp little book, black, that sat stiffly on a floating platter beside Dumbledore.

"What's this?" Bella asked, picking it up. Her hands still shook, but not as badly as before. Why, she did not know— if there was anything worse than hearing hints that your son could be in a coma, it was seeing him pale, naked and still. Bella blinked hard, twice, and finally began to see the book she had begun to leaf through. Its old, filmy pages were mostly blank, all except for the last four or five. It was odd,

for it looked like the words were disappearing from those pages even as she turned them. “Where did you find—”

“In his pocket,” Dumbledore said, wearily. “Haven’t had time to do more than set it aside, I’m afraid. If you know anything of its origins...Ms. Black? Is there something?”

“Origins,” Bella repeated faintly, staring at a line of horribly familiar handwriting on the very last page. “It makes sense. It all makes sense.” Dumbledore stood, the worry intensifying on his face, so she thrust the diary at him, her heart suddenly dry of hope.

Lucius was always good at revenge, Bella found herself thinking. She could almost spot the moment Dumbledore read the last page and understood— shock filtered slowly onto his face, and his hands tightened about the old little book as he muttered his way down the page, and then—

“My god.” The exclamation was breathed, and almost inaudible. The shock filtered in fast, then, even as the pages were turned again, absently, as Dumbledore re-read the disappearing words. The strained silence that settled on him as he did so made it awful to watch, so Bella moved slowly and jerkily to Antares’ side while it lasted, doing her best to ignore the ashen shock on Dumbledore’s face. She could feel Severus’ eyes on her back as she sat on the bed and laid hold of her son, but the scrutiny did not stop her tears.

“Fading,” Dumbledore suddenly said. “The words are fading— Merlin, *that’s* what it is! Poppy, check for a bond, now.” The command in his tone was unmistakable, and Bella heard the whisper and felt the rush of magic coming from Madam Pomfrey’s direction even as Severus spoke.

“Headmaster, surely you could have checked—”

“It is important that the memories don’t only come from me,” Dumbledore said absently, in the tone of someone very much concerned with other matters. Impatient, he fixed the book in the air momentarily, then floated it over to Severus with a negligent gesture, as if it was an unimportant detail. “Poppy, do you—”

"I see it," Pomfrey said, her voice hushed. "Good lord—"

"Reveal it," Dumbledore said, immediately. "We'll need many memories for this." And, all of a sudden, little points of light began to form on Antares' skin, starting at his face and quickly appearing all the way to his feet, the ones on the lower half of his naked body glowing faintly through the sheets. Bella let go of him reluctantly, her confusion at Dumbledore's words changing to fear as she watched the lights coalesce into a strong, wavering bond that stretched between Antares and the damp diary now in Severus' shaking hands. "Wait a moment— I'll handle this."

Severus' reply was hoarse. "Albus, don't—"

But Dumbledore had already gone still. His eyes had a faraway, fixed expression in them, and the air in the room began to feel heavy with magic.

"I didn't know," Severus was saying. Bella looked at him, and was struck by the desperation in his eyes. "I swear on my life—"

"Be quiet," Pomfrey snapped, her eyes wide with fear. "Watch the bond—"

Something was happening. The diary, still in Severus' hands, had closed and reopened, its pages slowly stirring and beginning to turn of their own accord. Bella stood, hope rising in her heart as she watched the dimming of the little pinpricks of light that dotted each page. Just in time, too; almost half of the pages she'd read were already blank. Bella glanced at the bond— oh thank Merlin, thank Morgana, it was finally dimming. Or was it? Her breath caught as it brightened again, unbearably so, then broke in the middle.

The next moment, Dumbledore was on his knees, and the bond was whole again, save for a small beam that split off it and now connected him and Antares.

A gasp later, the diary was falling to the floor, and Severus was dragging Dumbledore to his feet. Pomfrey, face white, swept the diary up in a Bubble Charm as Bella watched Severus guide Dumbledore's shaking steps and sat him down in the armchair by Antares' side.

Antares lay still, his paleness mocking them all as they watched Severus fan Dumbledore and prise open the top buttons of his robe.

“Stop that,” Dumbledore said thinly, his eyes opening briefly. He tried to raise a hand to his face, but quickly let it fall at the glare Severus gave him. “I’ll be fine.”

“You are mad,” was all Severus seemed able to say, in reply to that. “*Mad*. Did you even think?”

“That bond is not of Voldemort’s making,” Dumbledore replied, his tone faint but steady. “A blood bond, I think. Draining the diary, too, instead of what you would think. Very strange.”

Severus ignored him. “Poppy, something to clear his thoughts would probably be better than just that Reviving Potion—”

“I couldn’t break it,” Dumbledore went on, tired eyes now fixed on Bella. “Blood bonds are...selective. Did you adopt him only in name?”

Bella was already staring at her son, heart caught in her throat as she watched the light of the bond disappear as Pomfrey ended the revelation spell. “You think I could—”

“Even if it doesn’t work, it will at least slow down the erasure of the diary,” Dumbledore said encouragingly. “We two have much magic between us— perhaps enough to content it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Severus said grimly, accepting the two vials that floated to him, guided by Pomfrey’s shaking hand. “There’s no telling what meddling with that bond could have done to his mind. Poppy, if you’d pass the thinner—”

Bella turned away, slipping her wand from the sheath in her robe pocket. As she raised it, she faintly remembered Professor Flitwick’s fanatic insistence on their learning the modifications and uses of *Revelo*, and wondered if she would live to thank him. He’d probably turn away in disgust, or burn the polite letter she would send, but—

“Bella! What are you—”

“*Revelo*,” slipped from Bella’s lips before Severus could really do anything to stop her, and suddenly she was looking at the bond again, split as it was between the diary and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Severus straightened nearby, and that was the last thing Bella noticed before the action of stilling herself and her magic took its toll.

The room burst into colour. The grey stones of the walls glittered with what she knew were warding spells, and almost everything in the room seemed to glow with the reflected light of the bond, which was even brighter seen in its true form. It pulsed warningly as Bella reached for it with her mind, but did not react further as she focused her mind on the point where it split between Dumbledore and the diary. Severus, blurred as he was behind the shimmer of his magic, looked horribly angry, and was bent over Dumbledore. Looking at the bond, Bella understood why— the beam of light that connected Dumbledore to Antares was growing stronger, as if he was somehow pouring his magic into it, and—

Bella gasped, shifting her hold on the bond. It had suddenly turned a deep, warm colour she knew she could not name, and was burning hotter in the grip of her mind than it had before. Shaking with effort, Bella tightened her grip on it, not knowing what to do. It came to her slowly, on a thick tide of awareness, a faint repetition of what Dumbledore had just said. *A blood bond, I think. Blood bonds are...selective.*

Abruptly, her mind was racing through to the memory of that day she’d finally done it, finally bound Antares to her as she’d been wanting to. Bella drew in a breath to steady herself as she wrapped that memory around herself, feeling herself flinch again as she cut into her son’s hand with a knife, and then she was twisting at the bond, willing it to snap—

It snapped. Someone cried out, from far away, but Bella looked on, unshaken, dreading the vision of the bond snapping back and joining her to Antares but expecting it anyway. It was some time before she realised that Antares was simply glowing with light, and that the bond was no more. Even then, the memory of Antares biting his lip and pretending to be brave held her attention, settling about her as she felt herself sink to the ground.

Just before she closed her eyes, Bella heard someone whisper something. It sounded oddly like they were telling her to run. *Run where?* she wondered, finally letting her eyelids fall. *Run where?*

Whoever had whispered, it wasn't Dumbledore. The man couldn't whisper worth a damn, as far as Bella was concerned, for it was his 'whispering' that woke her up.

"For heaven's sake, Poppy, it's only quarter past six," he was insisting. "It's not yet dinnertime—"

"Nevertheless, you should be in bed," Pomfrey said, repressively. "Really, Albus. The elves can bring you dinner in your rooms just as well as they can here—"

"A bed in the ward will do just fine, Poppy," Dumbledore said, coaxingly, his plaintive tone making Bella think incredulously of what Antares sounded like when he was trying to convince her of something she didn't approve of. "Besides, I want to be here in case Mr. Black wakes up this evening. His colour *is* improving, isn't it?"

"It'll improve at just the same rate even if you're not here," Severus insisted. "And didn't you just say it was unlikely that he'd wake up this evening just a few minutes ago?"

"Unlikely, not impossible," was Dumbledore's muttered, almost petulant answer. "Oh, all right. You remember who to bring tomorrow morning, I presume? If not tonight, that is."

"Of course I do, Albus," Severus said impatiently. "No, don't get up just yet—"

"I was only sitting up," Dumbledore protested, sounding mildly amused. "I'm not quite ready to go just yet—"

Pomfrey's snort cut him off. "And why would that be?"

"I assumed you'd want to know that I will be doing my best to inform the school board of the goings on today by tomorrow morning," Dumbledore said calmly, clearly unaware of the outrageous

nonsense he was uttering. What on earth was he implying? The school board of governors, if Bella recalled correctly, was only informed when a student did something serious to another student. Which, as far as Bella knew, didn't apply in Antares' case. So *why on earth is he*— “Don't forget to tell Minerva to come up tomorrow morning, Severus— we will need her help.”

“Help?” Severus said, sounding almost as confused as Bella felt. “What will we need Minerva's help for? Albus, didn't you just imply that we solved the bond issue minutes ago?”

“She personally knows just the right barrister for Mr. Black's case, you see,” Dumbledore said, apparently ignoring Severus. “We'll have need of one when presenting the case before the board, and since the barrister I have in mind just happens to be Minerva's second cousin...”

“Albus, no matter how unusual it is for a boy of his age to faint several times within the week, the school board will hardly make a case of it,” Pomfrey said tartly, sounding nearby. “Well, that is unless Ms. Black decides to make some kind of complaint, which I doubt; the furore it would cause is the last thing she'd want, especially since the nonsense in the papers is only just dying down.”

“The school board will take notice once they find out just who owned that diary, however,” Dumbledore said pointedly, his matter-of-fact tone making Bella's mouth go dry. *I have to have heard that wrong—he can't seriously mean to tell them*— “And in that case, we *will* need some sort of representation, which means—”

“What do you mean, ‘once they find out’?” Severus asked suspiciously, rudely interrupting Dumbledore mid-sentence. “Unless I'm not mistaken—”

“You aren't, Severus,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Yes, I do mean to tell them it was found in his possession, but—”

“What? *Why?*” Pomfrey demanded, almost as if she could hear Bella's enraged thoughts. “You *know* how they are about Dark objects, Albus. Or don't you think they'll want to involve the Ministry once they hear that You-Know-Who is involved?”

“Albus, she’s right,” Severus said firmly. “It’s madness— the very least they’ll do is expel the boy, and even then—”

“Telling them about the diary without telling them about his possession of it will render it useless as a weapon against Lucius— can’t you see?” Dumbledore said, his tone becoming more passionate with every word. “Without evidence that it was purposely planted in the school, the diary becomes nothing more than a mysterious dark object we discovered. Any evidence of its harmfulness only makes sense in context of what it has done to the boy, and we simply *cannot* present its effects on him as evidence without admitting that it was in his possession.” A heavy silence greeted this last sentence of Dumbledore’s, but it neither stopped him, nor made his tone any less passionate, any less assured. “This is an iron-cast opportunity to remove Lucius from the board, Severus. I cannot, in good conscience, throw up my hands and let it pass me by.”

“And what if the case fails?” Severus finally snapped, tone harsh with disgust. “What then? The boy will be expelled, and his and his mother’s business splashed all over the papers. And speaking of the doting mother herself, I don’t think you’ve *quite* considered what she will do to you if she hears of this *preposterous*—”

“It only sounds preposterous to you because you haven’t thought things through,” Dumbledore shot back. “For Merlin’s sake, Severus, can you believe that that diary hasn’t already influenced the boy’s behaviour in some way already? Do you think it coincidence that he’s fainted twice already in the last two days? Do you think that all that’s been happening in Slytherin has nothing to do with the fact that he carried a prized possession of Voldemort in his pocket?”

“You can’t prove—”

“And isn’t that precisely *it*?” Dumbledore said, his tone louder and sterner than Bella had ever heard it. “I cannot prove that that bond was *not* of Voldemort’s making, either. That didn’t stop me from following my instincts and encouraging Ms. Black to try her hand at it, and look what happened.”

“Oh, for— Albus, she fainted from exhaustion!” Pomfrey snapped. “You can’t just—”

“Look at the diary,” Dumbledore said, ignoring her, his words accompanied by the sound of something shifting nearby. “Failing that, look at me. Do I look like a man being drained, Poppy?” Bella held her breath at the sound of turning pages, hoping. It occurred to her, now, why Dumbledore was being so insistent about the diary; if what she’d done had broken the bond, then maybe— “Read. Read from here.”

Severus sighed, angrily. “Albus, there is no need for this—”

“Severus, just *listen* to—”

“I was given this solution,” Pomfrey said suddenly, her shaky words silencing both men. “Now, at its completion, I realise that I am destined to live— to live on. Lucius, I bequeath this to you because you are one of my most faithful.” Pomfrey paused, taking a shaky, audible breath, then continued on, her voice seeming to only add to the heaviness of the silence. “I now set a spell on this diary, and a promise, so it shall not harm you. Sign now, and boldly, that the spell may be complete. Lucius Malfoy.”

The silence remained, for a moment, only broken by the muted thump the diary made as it was set down somewhere far away.

“I don’t understand,” Severus said finally. “How did you know the bond wasn’t his work?”

“I felt it,” Dumbledore said, simply. “I do not doubt that Ms. Black will say the same thing, when she wakes. It did not feel like his magic or intent was behind it at all, Severus. It felt...very different.” He paused for a moment, then continued, sounding almost wary. “Do you understand now?”

“Yes,” Severus said. “Yes, I believe I do.” Somehow, Bella got the impression that that was not all he understood, or agreed with. And, despite her fear at the thought of Antares being put on trial, she found herself agreeing too.

"Me too," Pomfrey said, sounding oddly choked. "I think— will pensieve memories be admissible as evidence, Albus?"

"Certainly, Poppy. Actually—"

"You'll have mine if you want them," Pomfrey said, cutting him off. "Just let me know."

"I don't think you'll want mine," Severus said dryly, after a moment, "but they're on offer as well."

"Thank you for both your offers, Severus, Poppy," Dumbledore said warmly. "You've no idea how much easier that will make things."

"I'm sure things will be even easier if you get to sleep as soon as possible, Albus," Pomfrey said, firmly. "I don't care where you sleep, as long as you start doing it. You're not invulnerable to Dark magic, whatever you might think."

Dumbledore sighed. "Poppy, that bond was *not*—"

"Albus, please. I've seen almost every type of bond that can exist between human beings in the last fifty years, all right? I think I'd know whether it was Dark or not."

"But it felt—"

"That's the problem with bond theory, Albus; knowing a thing can't give you the instinct for spotting it when it matters. I saw that bond, all right? It held tightly, and was extremely hard to disperse. You yourself guessed at its being a blood bond. Now tell me how many ways a blood bond can be Light."

"Poppy—"

"No, really— try. Or should I ask Severus instead...?"

"Two," Severus said immediately, sounding amused. "One of which is difficult to implement."

“One of which has only been implemented *once*,” Pomfrey corrected, matter-of-factly. “And if Merlin had forgot to write the method down, there’d only be one known Light blood bond. Not so, Albus?”

“That still doesn’t explain why you think the bond was Dark,” Dumbledore pointed out, calmly.

“It linked to you as a punishment,” Pomfrey said, simply. “Crude, yes, and overly involved, but I doubt whoever cast it had any time to think about tuning or setting boundaries.”

A small silence seized upon that moment, disturbed only by the sounds of shifting and breathing. Bella had almost decided to give some sign that she was awake when Dumbledore broke it, his tone low and thoughtful. “Who do you think was the caster?”

Pomfrey hesitated for a a bit before answering. “If not Ms. Black herself, then one of the boy’s former parents. Do you know what happened to them?”

“Their end was likely far from peaceful, if that’s what you mean,” Severus said, quietly. “Albus, I believe it was the Sorting...? Yes, the Sorting Hat discovered some old memories of the boys— buried deep, as they’d likely be.”

“You can’t mean You-Know-Who was involved—”

Severus’ sigh said it all. “I don’t know about you, Albus, but I’d rather like to see those memories myself. The— He Who Must Not Be Named positively peppers this boy’s life, in comparison to those of his friends.”

“You might eventually, if his mother’ll consent to have me try to find them,” Dumbledore said. “I do hope she will. I’m starting to have a feeling that there’s a pattern to all this, somehow.” Soft footsteps began to accompany his quiet words. “I’d much rather it wasn’t there...feels so horribly haphazard. Suppose it can’t be helped...”

“Good night, Albus,” Pomfrey said, almost as quietly. Cool air bit at Bella’s exposed arm, making her try to twitch the blanket back over it without seeming as if she was awake. “Off to bed with you too,

Severus. Keep your Floo open, mind— I doubt I'll have time to send someone running after you if Antares wakes up."

Severus snorted, a little unconvincingly. "I wonder why you didn't remind Albus to do the same."

"Oh please," Pomfrey muttered. "We both know he'll Disillusion himself and hop into one of the empty beds outside—"

"—and still show up when you Floo his office," Severus finished wryly. "I wonder what notification spell he uses. Mine never really seem to work for very long."

"I personally think he renews it every night," was Pomfrey's equally wry answer.

"Madness?"

"Eccentricity," Pomfrey said, the smile evident in her words. "You have no idea how long it took me to get over how bloody respected he was, after chasing those horrid little brats of his brother's around with burn solution—"

"I console myself with the thought that he's on our side," Severus replied, his voice starting to recede in the direction of what Bella now thought was the door. "Good night, Poppy."

"Try to eat, Severus!" Pomfrey called after him, her voice becoming abruptly muffled as it receded sharply towards the door. "Really— if the boy wakes up tomorrow, even Albus will be too excited to order anything up!" Bella shifted uneasily as Pomfrey sighed to herself, obviously amused, then moved back into the room and shut the door. "Ms. Black?"

It was very, very hard not to blink. Bella somehow succeeded, and held on even as Pomfrey's voice came closer. "Ms. Black? As you see, I didn't tell anyone you were awake. Won't bother asking how long— if anyone deserved to hear what Albus is planning for that son of yours, it's you." At that, Bella opened her eyes. As she'd thought, Madame Pomfrey was standing near her bed or cot or whatever it

was, a rather guarded look on her face. “I won’t bother you for long; just have a thing or two to say, if you’ll listen to me.”

Bella cleared her throat, as quietly as possible. “I’m listening.”

“To put it bluntly, Ms. Black, if I were you, I’d milk this plan of Dumbledore’s for all it’s worth,” Pomfrey said, her calm tone at odds with her strangely direct words. “You didn’t have a chance to hear about his plan to inform the school board, did you? Don’t answer that— no point. All I’ll say is this; when he explains, pretend not to understand.”

Bella turned her face toward the door, examining it absently as she considered this strangely sly advice. It wasn’t anything she hadn’t been absently considering already, but to have it said and said by *Madame Pomfrey* gave it a kind of reassuring weight. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Pomfrey nodded, then turned away. “If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to—”

“Um,” Bella found herself saying, as she suddenly connected her nagging worry about the Floo to the dress sample she’d been supposed to submit to Bernard. “I was wondering if I could use the Floo...”

“There’s powder always floating right next to the Floo in my office,” was the prompt answer. “Are you going through entirely? Because if you are—”

“I think I’ll just be popping my head in, actually, so...”

“Perfect. My office is almost right across from this door on the other side of the ward, so you should have no problems getting to it. And about dinner, I think a house elf wouldn’t mind bringing something up for the both of us.” Pomfrey came close, her calm expression becoming slightly blank as she checked Bella’s pulse and gently closed the cupboards that Bella hadn’t quite noticed were now just above her. “You just wait till you feel up to it, Ms. Black— I’ll leave the doors open for you, so there’s no need to worry about waking anyone to help. And when that—”

“Bella,” Bella said, only just realising that Madame Pomfrey *had* called her son Antares, just a few minutes ago. “You may call me Bella.”

“Thank you,” was the slightly grave answer, half-whispered from Pomfrey’s direction as she pushed open the door to the room. “How about seven— no, *tempus*— seven thirty, or eightish, for dinner?”

Bella sat up stiffly, her eyes going automatically to Antares’ small, almost restless form on the bed nearby. Nothing was settled, of course. Just now, however, she couldn’t help feeling just a little like everything would be fine. “Seven thirty will be just fine,” she said, by way of answer, as Pomfrey left the room. “Just fine.”

Bella awoke slowly, wondering when she’d dropped off. Last night, after the dinner things had been taken away, Madame Pomfrey had not stayed long. She’d checked Bella’s blankets and bustled around Antares for a few moments, then promptly exited the small room, locking and warding the door as she went. Bella had risen slowly and moved to check on Antares, then, after debating with herself for a few moments, stripped the blankets from the tiny cot set up for her on the other side of the room and crept into the armchair to beside him to keep watch. Only for an hour or two, or so she’d thought— her body, now stiff with sleeping in the chair, had obviously had other ideas.

Antares, to her relief, looked almost normal now— there was colour in his cheeks, and he shifted a little in his sleep, as he always had. After stumbling out of the armchair and stretching quickly, Bella put a hand to his neck, and felt foolishly reassured by its warmth. As she stroked his hair, she reminded herself that he might wake up mad, or not wake at all, or some odd combination of the two that was even worse. Who knew what effect that bond had had on him? Or, worse still, if the backlash from breaking it had harmed him in some way? As for the diary, Bella tried vainly to put it from her mind, because she couldn’t bear to think of her son being— being used by—

Bella shook her head, flinging the thought away. “You can’t have him,” she whispered, her hands curling into fists in Antares’ hair. “Can’t.” Antares stirred in her arms, frightening her, but it was only the

restlessness of sleep that turned him on his side, curling toward her as he'd done when he was small. Somehow, the sleepy, groping hand that settled on hers calmed her down. It occurred to her that if the Dark Lord had somehow possessed Antares, he wouldn't be asleep. It had probably occurred to Dumbledore as well, especially since he'd not even hinted at doubts that Antares was still himself.

Bella straightened slowly. Then again, there was the fact that Pomfrey had warded the door to this room very firmly. What if—

Leave it. Just leave it, Bella told herself, looking down at Antares' pale face. *How can you know until he wakes up? And, well, if he doesn't...* she shivered. *If he doesn't, it might be for the best.*

For a while, Bella sat there, her hands on her son's face, her head aching with the thought of everything just suddenly...ceasing, for him. After surviving those bullies, surviving this school, this *place*—

"If you wake up," Bella whispered, ignoring the futility of it, "I'll take you away. I promise. For as long as you like, Tares." She blinked, rapidly, her now-damp hand unconsciously stroking Antares' hair again. "As long as you like. I promise." He shifted, stretching slowly in her arms.

Bella wept, for a while, without disturbing the silence in the room. Then, when Antares began to shift again, she straightened. "*Creo speculum,*" she forced out, listlessly flicking her wand in the required pattern. The mirror she produced was almost too tarnished for her to see herself, but not enough to completely disguise the redness of her eyes. "*Dissimulo,*" she whispered, imagining her skin fresh, her eyes clear. The mirror grudgingly revealed the small glamour's effect, and, its work done, was promptly banished. Looking at Antares, Bella almost began crying again— why on earth was she bothering, anyway? If he didn't wake—

Leave it, Bella. "*Tempus,*" she whispered, for something else to think about, and as if some cruel god wanted to punish her for it, the door to the room clicked open almost immediately after she discovered it was seven a.m. Madame Pomfrey entered quietly, followed by an unusually grim-looking Dumbledore. Severus was nowhere to be seen, which hurt. Just now, she badly wanted him there to hover near

her and scold her surreptitiously about endangering herself yesterday. Or awkwardly tell her not to worry about Antares in that quiet, concerned tone that was not quite suitable for public consumption.

Madame Pomfrey wasn't doing too bad a job of it, though, her tone the perfect mix of cheery and serious as she checked Antares' status and fussed about his bed. She even smiled at Bella, calmly and courteously enough that Bella couldn't help smiling back— a mistake, since it meant that Dumbledore decided it was safe to speak for the first time.

"At this moment, the secretary to the school board is likely reading my subsequent letter to the board, which requests that they hear me on the issue of your son's expulsion—"

"Expulsion?" Bella interjected, flatly. "Is that what they're calling voluntary withdrawal these days?"

Dumbledore frowned. "But—"

"I believe verbal announcement qualifies as a statement of intent, still?" Bella said politely, deeply savouring the light confusion on his face. "Or perhaps you didn't hear me when I clearly stated my intent last night to withdraw my son from your school...?"

"Ah," Dumbledore said, blinking slowly. "Actually—"

"I won't have his reputation sullied by the board's favouritism, thank you. I'm also quite ready to go to the press to make sure his reputation *stays* unsullied, mind you—"

"You don't seem to realise that I'm on your side, Bellatrix," Dumbledore said, suddenly, his face taking on a wry expression. "Or is it to remain Ms. Black?"

Bella only just refrained from biting her lip at the overt gesture of intended compromise. "Keep talking and I'll tell you," she said after a moment, restricting herself to just one look in Pomfrey's direction. She looked almost too calm, quietly Banishing the cot Bella had abandoned for the armchair last night— probably enjoying this—

“Right,” Dumbledore said, nodding in slightly obvious relief. “You see, it is extremely in my interest that your son stays on here, at Hogwarts. Frankly, it is the safer option for him, especially if we are able to sort out the little matter of Lucius and that diary. Far safer than him staying stuck in your home or in the corner at your workplace for the next four years—”

“And if I were to insist on having him out of school for the rest of this year, you would...?”

“Heartily concur,” Dumbledore said, nodding again. He began to move over to Antares’ other side, carefully skirting the tiny table on which the still wonderfully calm Pomfrey had just finished laying out a few potions— most of them standard emergency ones, by the look of them. “After such an ordeal, he’ll likely need some rest. Some time to acquaint himself with any changes. Months, perhaps. And since it would be easier for him to catch up over the summer and begin afresh...” Dumbledore conjured another armchair and sat down, sighing.

Something tight seemed to loosen between Bella’s shoulders at that last sentence. Sighing, she wondered what she’d expected after overhearing Dumbledore’s passionate arguments last night. Agreeing to all her terms and whims concerning Antares would be his prime concern if he wanted to try to convince her to help build a case against Lucius. Shifting the sheets still on the armchair a little, Bella sat down. “I’d like you to call me Bella, then.”

Dumbledore smiled. “I would ask you to call me Albus, but everyone tells me that takes some working up to,” he began, his tone including an eerily appropriate amount of friendliness. “As for Headmaster, I’ve always thought—”

The door swung open, cutting Dumbledore off mid-sentence. Severus strode inside, his guarded, almost stiff expression indicating that he might not be alone. Sure enough, two familiar-looking children sidled in close after him, looking anxious. The boy paused and stared at her; the girl started to rush to Antares’ side, then stopped as she caught sight of Dumbledore, who cleared his throat.

“Ah, Professor Snape,” he began, but the boy, whom Bella was half-sure was called Blaise, cut him off.

“He’s not awake yet!” he blurted out, the worry clear in his tone. “Why isn’t—?”

“Why, Mr. Zabini, I believe he’ll soon be able to tell you himself,” Dumbledore said warmly, making a show of rummaging in his pocket and checking an odd-looking watch. “Yes, yes...in about an hour, if I’m not wrong. Meanwhile, however, I’ve some questions for you and Miss Davis— just a few little things I’d like cleared up, if you will.”

“The talking won’t wake him up?” Davis— no, Tracey asked, looking both worried and suspicious. “Although I suppose it won’t, since you were talking when we came in.”

“Quite right, Miss Davis,” Dumbledore said, motioning casually to Severus. “Professor Snape, the door, please?”

Severus shut the door quietly, gesturing sharply as he did so. By the time it shut, Bella could already feel the muted feel to the sounds in the room— clear signs of a strong Silencing charm. Tracey, now looking curiously at her, didn’t seem to feel the difference, and neither did Blaise, who was fidgeting nervously and glancing worriedly at Antares.

“Please sit,” Dumbledore said, waving three more chairs into existence in just the right positions. They were much smaller than the armchairs he’d conjured before, since the room was quite crowded already with the two children fidgeting about, and two of them were placed close to Antares’ bed and facing Dumbledore. The third chair, which Severus promptly took, was over by the cupboard of medicine supplies that Pomfrey had long ceased fiddling with. “Now, as I said, I’ll only ask a few questions. If you have any extra information— anything, really, that you think could help us understand what to expect when Antares wakes up, feel free to share it, all right?” Blaise and Tracey nodded slowly, both of them leaning forward slightly. “Now, then. Poppy, if you’d just float out the diary...there. Have either of you seen this diary before?”

Blaise looked at it for a moment, then shrugged, looking confused. “No, not really.” Bella tried not to slump in her chair, but it was hard not to. If even Antares’ *friends* didn’t know what on earth the book was doing in his possession, then how were they to go about tracing it to Lucius? If he’d slipped it to Antares before term started— how was easy, too easy, when he’d held on so long to Antares’ cauldron in Flourish and Blott’s— then it followed that Antares’ friends would have seen it at least once.

Dumbledore seemed to have come to a similar conclusion, from the unhappy surprise on his face. “Quite sure?” Dumbledore asked, looking from Blaise to Tracey. “It was found in his pocket, so—”

“Can I...?” Tracey asked hesitantly, pointing belatedly at the diary, which hung suspended in a Bubble Charm, floating between her and Dumbledore. Dumbledore nodded sharply, drifting the bubble over to her. Bella marvelled at his calm expression, which stayed the same even as Tracey boldly drew the bubble into her lap and peered at it. “I think I might have...wait. There’s— there’s writing.” She straightened, holding out the bubble with a puzzled look on her face. “There wasn’t any— wouldn’t have been any.”

Dumbledore waved the diary into his hands absently, eyes intent on Tracey’s face. “In what?”

“A book,” she said, slowly. “He used to carry one. I’m not sure—”

“Without anything written in it, you say?” Dumbledore prompted. “No drawings, no pictures—”

“No, not a thing,” Tracey said, nodding slowly. “I dunno why I can’t remember, really. He used to carry it around all the time.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said calmly, encouragingly. The air in the room seemed very still now, only punctuated by all their breathing and the small shifting sounds Blaise made as he continued to fidget in his chair. “And this diary reminds you of it?”

Tracey nodded quickly. “It was the same size, I think. Never really looked in it, myself— just saw him looking in it, and saw it was blank

and stuff. Maybe that's why I remembered it...he's a bit, erm, weird about telling us things, but he always shares books."

"You know," Blaise said, screwing up his face in thought, "now that you mention it, I *think* I remember what book you're talking about."

"You should know the one, yeah," Tracey said, frowning slightly in a way that wrinkled her small nose. Somehow, seeing it reminded Bella of Narcissa. Frowning, Bella blinked away the memory and focused her attention on what the girl was saying. "...always had it, even in class. What pocket was that one in?"

"This diary?" Dumbledore said, patting the bubble questioningly. As Tracey nodded energetically, he looked over at Pomfrey. "The right one. Eh, Poppy?"

"It was the right one, Headmaster," Madame Pomfrey said, her tone firm. "All damp, too, from the ink—"

"Ink?" Bella said quickly, sitting up immediately. "I didn't see any when I came in."

"I'd put an absorption spell on it by that point," Pomfrey said, nodding slightly. "Did that to all his things as soon as he was brought in, since I didn't want anything contaminating wounds. You can never be too careful with that sort of thing."

"And I believe you redirected the absorbed liquid?" Dumbledore asked, his calm tone belying the urgent look in his eyes. When Pomfrey nodded, he sighed in satisfaction. "Good, good— that will be just the thing. Now, Miss Davis, if you would...is there a problem?"

Tracey had just shaken her head twice in a row, and was now blinking confusedly. "No, I don't— I was just trying to remember more about that book of his. It's just— weird. Just can't quite get at it, really. It's there, but—"

"It's there?" Dumbledore said, tone turning slightly sharp. "Miss Davis, please look up for a moment. Look me in the...ah." Dumbledore's eyes widened slightly as Tracey looked him in the eye then flinched

back without breaking eye contact. “Miss Davis, would you care to explain how it feels when you try to think about Antares’ book?”

“Um,” Tracey began, hesitating a little, “it’s like— fuzzy. Just not...I don’t know. Like there’s a space there, sort of. Like if I tried really hard, I could remember what it looked like...” Bella’s lips pursed of their own accord as she re-ran that rambling little admission in her head. It all pointed to the girl feeling like she had a gap in her memory, of course, clear as day.

Bella drew in a slow, calming breath, trying not to panic. The only problem, really, was that it all pointed to Antares having had something to do with it, which was preposterous. Wasn’t it?

“I see,” Dumbledore said again, his contemplative tone cutting straight across the seething panic starting to form in Bella’s head. “I don’t suppose you would object to a simple mind clarification charm? Just to help you focus...?” Tracey hesitated a moment, glancing briefly at Antares before she nodded slowly. “Now, then. Just relax—you should feel a little sharper after I’ve done this. *Clarescere*.”

Bella quashed the urge to smirk bitterly— without even trying to sense the spell unravelling right in front of her, she could almost feel *her* senses sharpening as Dumbledore lightly wiggled his fingers, eyes intent on the now rather still Tracey, whose eyes were closed. *Simple clarification charm indeed*, Bella thought, inhaling slowly to control her reaction to the spell. A moment later, the feeling of proximity to some kind of painfully sharp smell diminished, but the girl’s eyes remained closed. Dumbledore sat back slightly, crossing his ankles in a way that only suggested satisfaction. Bella could only shift and fidget, hoping that this little investigation didn’t lead where it seemed to be going.

Tracey began to slump forward, very slowly. Blaise started and reached out for her, jerkily. As his hand touched her arm, her eyes flew open, and she started away from him, shivering.

Dumbledore was already leaning forward, his face the very picture of concern. “Miss Davis—”

“Merlin,” Tracey said, shakily. “Oh god...”

“Miss Davis—”

She wasn't listening. “He didn't give them back,” she whispered, her eyes now locked on Antares. “I can't believe it—”

“Miss Davis, *who*—”

“Blaise,” Tracey said, turning toward her friend, a horrified look on her face, “you don't remember, do you? Oh god.” Something about it all—the confused horror of her tone and her small, brief shivers finally clicked in Bella's mind, making her go still. *She has been memory charmed*, Bella thought, her mouth falling slightly open. *Please not by my son. Please.*

Blaise was staring at Tracey, now, looking confused. “What do you mean I don't remember? You're not making—”

“Obliviation,” Tracey said, through gritted teeth. Bella forced herself to breathe, to listen. “Ring a bell?” When Blaise's mouth fell open, Tracey began to shake her head. “He just didn't— Professor,” she switched tack, turning back to Dumbledore, “it wasn't— he meant to give our memories back. Antares wouldn't have— it was *our* idea. He meant to give them back, I'm sure he did—”

“But he did not,” Dumbledore said slowly, stroking his beard. “I think I see, now—”

“You *don't*,” Tracey said wildly, starting half out of her chair. Bella began to finger her wand, only marginally aware of Severus shifting sharply over at the other end of the room, gaze fixed on Dumbledore just as firmly as Tracey's fearful one was. Tracey coloured under the Headmaster's calm gaze, and she flopped back into her chair seconds later, her eyes now firmly on her twisting hands.

Bella forced her own hands, voluntarily empty, into her lap. *If he did this, what else? What else has my son been doing?* Suddenly, Dumbledore's determination last night seemed all too forthright, all too practical. For Merlin's sake, they didn't even know how long he'd had the diary, and considering the evil that had lain in it, a week seemed horribly long. Unfortunately, Tracey's words indicated

longer— *you should know the one*, she'd said, confidently. That meant more than a week, didn't it?

Bella's hands began to shake from her logic, so she stopped trying to think it all out, focusing instead on Dumbledore. "Mr. Zabini," he was saying, his tone polite and encouraging, "do you understand the allegation Miss Davis has just aired against your friend?"

"Our friend," Blaise said firmly, defiantly. "And I don't think it's true. Antares doesn't— *none* of us know how to Oblivate anyone." He looked meaningfully at Tracey. "None of us know that kind of stuff."

"Just don't blame me if they find out," was her clipped, equally defiant answer. Bella stared at her, wondering what on earth she meant *now*. Surely it was obvious that they'd already found out that someone, if not Antares, had Oblivated both of his friends? Bella began to wonder about who else might have done it, then realised what she was doing and brought the train of thought to a crashing stop. "Antares didn't do anything wrong, all right?" Tracey was saying, to what seemed like no one in particular. "That's all I'm saying."

"I understand," Dumbledore said quietly, his tone strangely kind. "In fact, I am almost of the same opinion as you are, Miss Davis." *Thank god for that*, Bella thought, sighing inwardly. "Now," Dumbledore went on, encouragingly, "if Mr. Zabini will consent to have the same clarification charm performed on him...?"

Blaise looked questioningly at Tracey, who simply continued to stare down at her hands. After a moment, he shrugged and looked at Dumbledore. "If it'll help."

Dumbledore nodded, then, eyes intent, performed the charm again. This time, the effect was sharper. As Blaise's eyelids drooped and finally shut, Bella found herself unconsciously bounding her mind in flyaway threads in response to the feeling of her suppressed memories starting to surge forward. Once the spell ceased, Blaise slumped forward, more quickly and more severely than Tracey had. As she hauled him properly into his seat, he started awake. The fear in the look he exchanged with his friend then was almost palpable.

Dumbledore cleared his throat lightly. It was still enough to make the two children start in their seats. “Mr. Zabini?”

“He didn’t do anything wrong,” Blaise said, his voice shaking slightly. For a moment, Bella wanted very badly to hit him— *if he didn’t do anything wrong, he wouldn’t need to know how to Oblivate someone, you little idiot*— “We asked him to. Something must’ve gone wrong on his end, that’s all—”

“So you agree, then, that Antares Black Oblivated both you and Miss Davis?” Dumbledore’s calm tone was now tinged with steel, and his gaze uncompromising. Blaise stammered wordlessly for a moment, then looked at Tracey, whose eyes were now back on her hands. “With your consent, as it were. Is that so, Mr. Zabini?”

“We told him to do it,” Blaise repeated. Bella, unable to bear the implications of that statement, looked away, down at Antares. How on earth had he gone from her reckless, smiling son to an endlessly sleeping mute, a victim twice over? “I— I think I even threatened—”

Bella tuned out the boy’s plaintive tone with a bitter inward smile. *Thrice over*, she corrected herself, the bitter smile growing wide. *Don’t forget those wretched bullies—*

“Be that as it may,” Dumbledore said sternly, “your friend performed two illegal Memory Charms on both you and Miss Davis, and did not amend or change them as was probably planned. The fact that your memories were merely masked indicate that he did intend to, at some point, so—”

“It wasn’t his fault! We wouldn’t have asked him to if...” Blaise’s indignant tone faltered into nothing as Tracey kicked him. Bella found herself staring at the girl. Wanting to tell her that she could do better than that, much better— “Something went wrong,” Blaise said hesitantly, glancing at his scowling friend again. “That’s all, we promise—”

“Mr. Zabini, I assure you I am already quite sure of what went wrong,” Dumbledore said, interrupting. “What I need either you or Miss Davis to tell me is why on earth you asked your friend to Oblivate you when

you knew he was stressed and not quite himself. I trust that he seemed distracted at the time?”

“Anyone would be distracted with four seventh years out for their blood, don’t you think?” Tracey retorted, looking frightened but determined. “You make it sound like we didn’t care about him at all—”

“And you are sure his distraction was simply due to the bullying?” Dumbledore asked, seeming not to have fully heard what she’d said. For once, Bella didn’t care that the man was condescending dreadfully to the two children. *Let them suffer*, she thought, leaning over to brush Antares’ hair. *Let them feel it too*. “Quite sure?”

“How were we supposed to know?” Tracey shouted shrilly, her tone only increasing the tension in the small room. Bella looked up at her, half-surprised at just how loud the girl was being, and felt foolishly satisfied to see that she had gone quite red. “It’s not like we just went rooting in his head for it, all right? That wasn’t the *point*—”

Blaise gasped, cutting her off with a hard push to the side. “*Tracey!*”

“Oh, come on, d’you think he’s been asking to look in my eyes for nothing?” Tracey shouted at him, shoving him back with a violence that would have been shocking if not paired with that shout. “*Wake up*, Blaise—”

“Miss Davis, please—”

“So you supposedly know what’s wrong with him,” Tracey said, glaring at Dumbledore as she spoke over his concerned rejoinder. Bella checked the Headmaster’s expression, and found herself wondering if she would ever be so calm in the face of such rampant—“So how the *hell* didn’t you know what those bastards were doing to him? You just didn’t even—”

—*stupidity*? Bella hesitantly crossed out the word in her mind. The girl had tears in her eyes now, she was sure of it—

“Miss Davis, you will pipe down and apologise to the Headmaster *immediately*,” Severus said coldly, rising from his seat. As he slowly approached her, menacing as always, Tracey simply turned and

glared at him, hands shaking with what looked rather more like anger than like fear. "I will not repeat myself, Miss Davis—"

"You," Tracey said, faintly. Bella stared at her, now uncontrollably fascinated with just how much hatred could fit in the gaze of one little girl. "You knew. You *knew*—"

"Poppy, please escort Miss Davis and Mr. Zabini out of the Hospital Wing," Dumbledore said firmly. "I think we know quite enough to be going on with, now— thank you for your time, Miss Davis. You too, Mr. Zabini." He ignored the glare Severus turned upon him, and actually smiled at Blaise as he stood hurriedly, obviously glad to be gone. Tracey only hesitated for a split second before following suit; as she was guided out by a strangely satisfied-looking Madame Pomfrey, she glared small daggers up at Severus as she moved past him.

Severus scowled as the door clicked shut behind Pomfrey. "That was uncalled for."

"Oh, sit down," Dumbledore said, sounding almost amused. "A little rudeness never hurt anyone. Besides," he continued, his light tone gaining an undercurrent of steel, "we *do* have quite enough to be going on with, thanks to the delightfully outspoken Miss Davis. If I'm not wrong, we should have quite the complete picture of events, once Antares wakes up." Drawing out his pocket watch again, Dumbledore frowned slightly. "Good lord, eight already...Severus? I think Minerva's forgotten about meeting us. Floo her for me, will you?"

"Albus—"

"It's actually quite urgent that she meet us as soon as possible, Severus. I'm sure you'll let her know." As Bella dazedly watched an obviously irritated Severus leave the room, Dumbledore turned to her, the amusement now absent from his expression. "She's the only one that can pull a certified barrister into our service quick enough, just now," he explained. "Or, at least, the only one that can pull the exact sort of barrister we will need."

"Professor, if I'm not mistaken, my son will no longer be a Hogwarts student by this time tomorrow morning," Bella said slowly. Deliberately. "I think we have quite enough time—"

“Not if we want to catch the school board during a half-session,” Dumbledore replied, shaking his head slightly. “The next one is tomorrow, if *I’m* not mistaken. The next meeting would be in about two weeks time, and would be a full meeting of the board which, by then, would be afire with the story of your son’s expulsion from Hogwarts. They would have read or heard the undoubtedly garbled story from the *Prophet*, and almost all of them would have made up their minds about the outcome of any trial that would take place. It would be a circus, quite frankly, which is the last thing either you or your son needs, after everything that has happened. And, of course, Lucius will doubtless have prepared countering evidence, or discredited the diary entirely in some way.” Dumbledore gave her a meaningful look, then continued. “I’ve always preferred doing this sort of thing while I have the advantage. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Bella said, simply, without hesitation. Then, just because she wanted to see if he’d answer, “How do you plan to put together a case in a day?”

“With fifteen vials and some very careful extraction of some certain memories,” Dumbledore said blandly, tucking his pocket watch away. “I think every governor present on Thursday will benefit tremendously from seeing some of this whole thing first— no, first and a half hand, as it were. The extent of your son’s injuries after the last bullying incident, if nothing else.” Dumbledore gave her a questioning look. “All with your permission, of course.”

Bella smiled, bitterly. “You have it, Headmaster. You can count on it.”

A/N: Now, if you feel a bit cheated, imagine how I feel. I wrote this long scene expressly with the intention of having another very long scene after it, and look how my story rewards me. Bleh— on to the next chapter, I guess. It’s from Rita’s point of view, and is therefore awesome, because Rita Skeeter is ALWAYS awesome, right? Right?

As always, feel free to comment, review, scream, or whatever. I’m almost always online, and, with my new review-replying ethic, should get back to you pretty much immediately. Till the next chapter, guys!

Edit as of 8, March 2007: *Feeling confused? No idea what on earth the diary is STILL doing to Antares? Can't wait for the next chapter (which is now an Antares chapter, again, due to above confusion and general consensus)? Head on over to the latest entry on my LJ, where I explain some of what was going on in the comments. Feel free to rail at me as much as you like, as usual.*

Chapter 11: Winding Down

Waking was glorious. Antares, breathing deeply, relished the strange light feeling in his head. Slowly, slowly, the memory of Tom's raw screaming came back to him, jumbled up with the translucent sheen of his black shoes and the sound of his laughter as Antares lay defeated on the toilet floor. And then everything was suddenly coming back, familiar memories mixed with unfamiliar, the smell of the dry, fragile pages of the diary mixed with the slippery feel of the blood from the first dead cockerel.

Antares sat up slowly, grimacing at the unpleasant taste in his mouth. *I remember*, he thought uselessly, shivering at the strange memories that were occurring to him now. It only took him a minute of remembering how it had felt to laugh himself sick while the seventh years froze around him for him to start to force the thoughts back, back.

A moment later, Antares' thoughts were clearer than they'd ever been before, and he'd barely even *started* trying to sort them out.

What's happened to me? he thought, rubbing at his eyes. His head felt light and clear, empty of answers, so he opened his eyes instead. They stung as he looked around him, wearily recognising the crisp sheets and dreary wall-and-cabinet of the small room in the Hospital wing.

They stopped stinging once he saw the diary at the foot of his bed, though he blinked again and rubbed them, hard. The diary was floating in a bubble, half-open; the few pages he could see were mockingly blank. The rest of Antares' mildly aching body seemed suddenly not to exist, so strong was the feeling that Tom would suddenly settle into existence before him, that smile on his face. "*Blaise is dead,*" Antares could almost hear, in that steady, cruelly satisfied tone. "*Pity you aren't, but some things just can't be helped—*"

Outside the room, someone was approaching. Feeling returned to Antares' legs in a shock of cold as his bare feet thudded onto the stone floor. His tongue felt thick and useless in his mouth as he tried to summon his wand, and his fingers stiffened with the effort of flexing

them after what he suddenly knew was not in the room. As the door opened, Antares turned round, barely noting the warmth of the sheets as he attacked them for something, anything he could use to defend himself.

“Mr. Black!” Madam Pomfrey’s shock was palpable as always, and loud, her angry steps seeming to fill the room with sound. “What on earth are you doing? Get back in bed this instant!” Antares, half-frozen, could not find it in himself to turn around. Pomfrey’s voice and presence *sounded* real enough, but what was that, considering how Tom had probably had access to every memory Antares had had of the woman scolding him? “Did you hear me, Mr. Black?”

“He’s awake,” Bella whispered, behind him. “Thank Merlin.” It was all Antares could do to keep himself from turning around at the sound of that. He dropped the fistful of sheets he’d only been half-aware of holding and tried to make himself believe that Tom could not fake Bella’s voice so convincingly.

Bella’s hug decided him. It was too tight, and worsened by the scratchy robes she wore, giving Antares very clear notice that he needed to put something on. Somehow, the command got lost between his backside and his tired brain, and minutes later he found himself crumpled in Bella’s arms, his legs having failed him.

“He needs to get back into bed,” Pomfrey said firmly, but not as firmly as usual. Antares barely had time to glance at her strangely unworried expression before he was being bundled into the messy little bed and tucked very firmly into it. And even then, Bella was too warm and scratchy and silent to be ignored.

“I need to check him over,” Pomfrey said, her tone somehow careful. She was on the other side of the bed, holding a darkened vial of something Antares was sure would be unpleasant going down. “He must drink this at the very least, to help with the exhaustion.” That, together with the familiar look of the bright, frothing liquid Pomfrey began to pour very gently into a cup confirmed Antares’ dread. The slightly acid smell of the potion was familiar— Reviving potion, his brain told him, though he didn’t know if he’d smelled it last time. He couldn’t remember.

Antares froze. If— if he couldn't remember *that*, what else had he forgotten? His thoughts felt light still, light and empty. They worsened his fear, and though he dimly felt Madame Pomfrey nudging at him to accept the potion, he didn't react. Bella silently accepted it instead, then set it aside. Pomfrey left soon after, muttering something about finding Antares clothes and acting strangely undisturbed by how Bella hadn't agreed with any of her probably important suggestions about tests and the rest of it. As the door closed behind her, Bella took up the cup and wrapped Antares' hand slowly around it; somehow, that made it easier to ignore the burn as he drank it down. Within minutes, he was starting to shift in her partial embrace, despite his dread of what she would say when she finally spoke.

"I love you," she said, just when Antares had begun to think he would have to look at her to get her to say anything. "But you keep...doing this." Antares held his breath, fiercely berating himself for being surprised. As his mother's arms dropped from around him, he tried not to move. It was desperately hard, and the negligent way Bella's hand settled briefly on his shoulder made it even worse. "I need to know why."

Antares didn't know what was more painful— the fact that she was waiting so patiently for an answer to such a strange, empty question, or the fact that he didn't know what to say. A minute crawled by as he searched for something he could say without making him look like the idiot he'd been to trust Tom despite the signs. Several more went by as he tried to think of how to say how...safe talking to Tom had felt. How knowing— how thinking he knew where the danger lurked with the older boy had made him feel almost justified in extracting all he could from him.

"I wrote in it," Antares heard himself saying, thickly. "I do that. I write in all my books."

"But it wasn't your book," Bella pointed out, her words frighteningly still. "Was it?"

"It was in the book I bought," Antares said hesitantly, trying not to let the fear drag his words back into the sea of uncertainty that that thought was stirring. "I just assumed no one else wanted it."

Bella's laugh was so bitter it made him cringe. "I thought about it," Antares insisted uselessly, because there wasn't anything else he could think to say. "I thought about that, even if I didn't think of anything else. I *did*."

"Ssh," Bella said, stroking his hair, the bitterness on her face disappearing into a look so steady Antares thought he could drown in it. He looked down at his hands, twisted in the slightly dampening sheets, and only realised he was crying when Bella's hands began wiping the warm tears off his cheeks. It was hard to breathe for a moment, between the desperate need to bury his stupidity and the easy warmth of Bella's deft hands dabbing lightly at his chin, but the latter won by default, because Antares couldn't move away from her, not now, not when he needed to convince her— "Ssh. I know."

You don't, Antares wanted to protest. He sniffed instead, childishly, and leaned against Bella as she shifted closer to him on the bed, ignoring the awkwardness of the position. "I'm sorry."

"Don't give me that," was the strained, impatient answer. "Don't. You can't be sorry for something that isn't quite your fault." A soft silence settled upon them both, making Antares wish he could close his eyes against the new energy of the potion in him and drift off in Bella's arms. Then she spoke again, her sharp tone dispelling it all. "You'd have been better off as someone else's son," she said lowly, stroking his hair again. "But you know me. Stubborn. *Foolish*." Her voice was shaky now, with anger and fear and a hundred other things Antares did not understand. "Lucius has always known how to see one's weaknesses."

"Lucius?" Antares said, feeling some part of him go cold. "Lucius Malfoy?"

It was a moment before Bella answered. "His name," she said slowly, distinctly, "is on the last page of that diary." The look she directed at it frightened Antares. "He's forgot, though— I can't blame him." Then, in a lower tone, she added, "I'd forgot, myself."

"Forgot what?" Antares asked tentatively.

“Forgot my ancestors,” was the simple answer. “Your ancestors. Mine and his, and their sort of vengeance.” The look in Bella’s eyes was not pleasant, though it softened when she looked down at him. “Do you remember the Dancing Curse?”

Antares nodded slowly, uneasily remembering the fake stories he’d brought home to show her, which centred the curse on red shoes and other strange things, and only ever seemed to involve vain or greedy girls. The real curse had been something of an epidemic in Denmark, where the tale originated— permanent and deadly, the Dancing Curse was named for its last stages, when nothing but music would lure the feverish victim out of their doomed sleep and into a dance so perfect that they could reduce the contents of a room to dust within the requisite circle or square that their dance required. The thought of Lucius Malfoy or, better, *Draco* held in the grip of that curse both pleased and horrified Antares, enough that he only began to hear the rest of Bella’s low, angry murmuring when it grew too loud for him to ignore.

“...stood with me in the same room, watching people leak blood from everywhere possible, and somehow thought I’d forget it all, didn’t he? People who use such curses in peacetime are highly desperate, I’ll grant him that, but he seems to think them few.” Bella let out a long hiss of a sigh, the ugly look on her face becoming worse with every passing minute. “He seems,” she began again, through gritted teeth, “to think them all far away from him, and himself out of their reach.”

Antares grabbed her hand and squeezed it, hard, wishing he could shake that look from her face. “Mum. *Please*...?” Her hand felt cool and almost limp in his, as if all of the warmth had retreated up into her face, concentrating in her burning eyes. “Mum,” he whispered, shaking her hand.

Bella looked down for a long moment, and when her eyes met his again, the look was hidden. “He’s half-right, at least,” she said, softly. “Half.” A disturbingly wistful smile surfaced on her face, freezing Antares momentarily. But when she looked at him, smiling properly, he couldn’t help but smile back. “I need you to be calm,” she said, her hand turning over in his grasp. “There’s to be a trial held for you.” As shock and confusion filtered rapidly through Antares, he felt his

mother's hand squeeze his. "We have evidence, Antares. Lucius signed his name himself— he must explain that to them, at least." She touched his face, gently. "They won't blame you for anything."

For a long moment, Antares could not make himself say a thing. "*Why?*"

Bella smiled, bitterly. "You called him Tom," she said, slowly. "You never asked his last name, did you?"

"Didn't care," Antares said, staring at her. "Why does it matter?"

"The Dark Lord had a last name, once," was Bella's strange, stilted answer. "Not that it would have helped, knowing. He'd have lied to you. You must remember that."

"Why are you saying that?" Antares asked, though he could guess. "You're not serious. I— I didn't. I *didn't*." Bella's silence seemed to mock him, just as Tom had at the end. *No, not Tom*, insisted some wild, stupid voice in Antares' head. *Call him by his real name*. "No." The low, useless denial was swallowed up by the fierceness of Bella's hug, and Antares let it disappear, let it be muffled in her shoulder.

It didn't mean anything, anyway. The damage was already done.

Though Antares didn't want to let himself believe that Tom could be— could have been Voldemort, he had to. By the time Professor Dumbledore had ushered in Madam Pomfrey and Ms. Fawcett, a distressingly well-groomed witch the old man introduced as Antares' barrister, Antares found himself believing every bit of it. How else would it be possible that the *Headmaster of Hogwarts* would open and close the door what seemed like a thousand times, make everyone tea or coffee, check the time, conjure three more armchairs like the one Bella had dragged near to Antares' bed and still somehow find time to skewer Antares with those shrewd, shuttered eyes?

"Now," Professor Dumbledore said, sounding firm and even a little solemn as he finally dropped into his own chair, positioned on the

other side of Antares' bed, "now, we can begin." Despite how...*examined* Antares had felt in the last few minutes, it felt miles better than being the centre of the Headmaster's attention. "If you would begin, Mr. Black, with how you found the diary."

Antares nodded nervously, trying not to look at where it had been moments before. The absence of it somehow irritated and relieved him at the same time. On one hand, he couldn't stand the sight of it anymore. On the other hand, however... "It's not under my bed, is it?" Antares felt his face heat at the stupidity of asking such a thing, but couldn't help himself. "It isn't, is it?"

"Certainly not," Dumbledore said, smiling calmly. "We must have shuffled it out without you quite seeing— a mistake, now that I think of it. The diary is—"

"I don't need to know where it *is*," Antares said, backtracking desperately. "I just...don't want it nearby."

Though it lasted only a short moment, Dumbledore's pause was heavy with meaning. "I understand. Now, as to where you actually found it for the first time..."

"In my new Transfig book." Antares tried to stop his hands from twisting at the sheets in his lap, but they didn't seem to be listening. "Transfigurations, I mean. I found it in there on the train here."

Ms. Fawcett cleared her throat. "And do you make a habit of only opening your school books on the train, Mr. Black?"

Bella shifted, her cold gaze sweeping down onto the now slightly twitchy Ms. Fawcett. "Are you implying something?"

"I doubt it," Professor Dumbledore said, glancing evenly at both of them. "It is likely something the governors will wish to know, however."

"Wait," Antares said, something horrible suddenly occurring to him. "Isn't Lucius Malfoy one of them? One of them governors?"

"I think you'll find it will work out to our advantage if he's present at your trial," Bella said reassuringly, though her eyes were not on him as she spoke. They were fixed on Ms. Fawcett, and moved to fix on the Headmaster seconds after Antares noticed her line of sight. "Go on, dear."

"First time I wrote in it was when I found it," Antares said hesitantly. "It was— I think— I needed to write something down, so I wouldn't forget it." The words stung at him even as they dropped off his tongue, heavy as the thought that not having parchment on him might have led to something so impossible. "It was cool," he said, in as small a voice as he could manage. "Watching the words disappear, I mean. I didn't think— I showed it to my friends, and they just thought it was cool, so I stuck it in my pocket and forgot it for a bit."

Dumbledore's eyes pierced Antares, so that he could almost feel the short nod the old man gave. "Go on."

"He remembered me," Antares said, slowly. "When I wrote in it again, he remembered me. It was weird, but nice, sort of. I wasn't very...happy, at the time, and he said he knew my great-aunt. Walburga Black," he added, in case Ms. Fawcett didn't know, or Madam Pomfrey, but since neither of them looked very confused, Antares decided to go on. "He was interesting to listen to— to read, I mean. I liked knowing things other people didn't, really. It helped."

"Helped with what?" Ms. Fawcett asked carefully, glancing at Bella. When Antares did not say anything, Fawcett gave him a horribly kind look. "If you can't—"

"I can say," Antares mumbled, finding he had to look away from Bella to do so. *She's going to think it's her fault, though it's not*, he couldn't help thinking, as he opened his mouth. But by the time he found the strength to look at the guilt on his mother's face, the words were already coming out. "From about the moment term started, everyone hated me. I was— there were these seventh years." Antares tried to force out the words to describe what they had done, but found nothing but the wild laughter that had been watching them be Petrified by that awful snake. "They..."

"You can just say their names," Fawcett said quietly. "If that helps."

It did, to Antares' shame. "Rookwood," he said anyway, despite the bite of it, "Robert and Rachel Rookwood. Willa Avery, and Ed Yaxley."

"Had they bullied you before?"

Antares somehow held back a laugh. "I don't think they knew who I was, before. I really don't know." Fawcett looked at him expectantly, as if waiting for him to say more. "Once they started in, everyone else sort of joined in. It was horrible."

"It was more than horrible, thank you," Pomfrey said sharply, giving Antares the first pitying look he could remember receiving from her. "I'm sorry to say that I wasn't very sorry to see them Petrified. I saw Mr. Black in here almost every morning, Ms. Fawcett, literally battered and bloody. And even that description doesn't cover what was done to him last Saturday."

Fawcett nodded slowly. "And you'll be happy to supply memories of any of these incidents?"

Pomfrey nodded sharply, angrily. "The least I could do," she muttered, not seeming to care that Antares was staring at her in grateful shock. "Wouldn't be at all charitable to leave those little fiends in stasis, would it?"

"Is that why you pranked them, Mr. Black?" Fawcett asked, not seeming to hear the last of what Pomfrey had said. "Get your own back, so to speak?"

"Yeah," Antares said, dread creeping up his spine at the sheer thought of what he was about to admit. "I thought— at first, I was just going to steal their things. Wasn't hard to get hold of the password for the girls' dorms, not with...the cloak." He glanced quickly at Dumbledore, hoping uselessly that he'd somehow guess what cloak he was talking about, but the Headmaster's face simply showed the same confusion as everyone else's.

"What cloak?" Fawcett asked, tentatively. "Could you—"

“An Invisibility cloak,” Antares forced out, before his nerve failed him. The disbelieving silence that followed the admission made it hard to keep on, but he managed it somehow. “Got it last Christmas, in the post.” He looked at his mother, willing her to remember, to understand. “Don’t you remember? I lied about it. You knew.”

“Knew?” Bella repeated, incredulously. “If I’d known...you brought it here, didn’t you? With *Quirrell* here? Were you mad?”

Antares’ voice almost failed him at the look on her face. “Yeah,” he said, in a very small voice. “I— I learned some Occlumency.”

“From a book you bought in Diagon Alley,” Bella said, her tone hard and mocking. Looking at Antares’ frozen-feeling face, she laughed bitterly. “We learned *that* from those friends of yours. At this rate, I can only feel grateful that putting that memory charm on them was their idea. Who taught you that, anyway?”

It hurt to say it, but Antares managed to anyhow. “It was in the same book.”

Bella smiled, bitterly. “Priceless.”

Somehow, the reproving look Dumbledore sent her way gave Antares no satisfaction. “Perhaps we should stick to more pertinent questions for now, Ms. Black,” Dumbledore said, quietly. His eyes pierced Antares again. “You said you received the cloak at Christmas?”

“I know I shouldn’t have kept it,” Antares said desperately, hoping that no one would look too closely at that half-lie. “But— it wasn’t like there was a return address or anything. All there was was some weird letter!”

Dumbledore nodded slowly, his face so frozen in thought that it was hard to watch for long. Antares couldn’t help flinching a little as he began to speak again. “Did you keep the letter?”

“Yes,” Antares said quickly, hoping he’d brought it to school with him. Just now, he couldn’t quite remember if he had— maddening, since he couldn’t decide if that was Tom’s fault or if it was his for being in such a stupid daze earlier on about Bella and Professor Snape and

their irritating relationship. "I don't— I can't remember if I actually brought it with me."

"No matter," Dumbledore said, not seeming to care. "We'll check your trunk once we're done, and if it's not there, I'm sure your mother can check your room for you," he went on, his tone too absent to be really reassuring. "So. Somehow— and stop me if I am incorrect— you seem to have gone from planning to steal some possessions from your bullies to dousing their rooms in chicken blood." The look he now gave Antares as he flinched again was strangely kind, though firm. "I'd like you to tell me how."

Hours seemed to pass while Antares spoke, and kept on speaking. Madame Pomfrey left the room twice, but didn't come back the second time. She'd spoken to Dumbledore before she left, too quietly for Antares to understand what she said, and the Headmaster's face had gone startlingly blank for a moment, so blank that Antares had stopped speaking.

"Go on, Mr. Black," Dumbledore was saying now, as he'd said then. "We're almost done."

They were, despite the way they'd all kept silent as Antares rambled uncontrollably about Tom and the things he'd said, the way they'd mostly made sense. The way everything had suddenly come apart. There'd been times Antares hadn't been able to keep his voice from shaking. One of the worst of those was just past, and yet—

The warmth of Bella's arms coming slowly around him steadied him yet again, making it easier to continue. Not easy enough that his voice stopped shaking, but then, none of this was easy.

"I didn't know what to do," Antares said lamely. "I just went limp against the door; thought I could keep it shut. He didn't really care about pulling me away, I think. Told me it'd be easy once I was dead." He swallowed, shoving down the anger and fear that rose up in him at the thought of that. "Not much you can say to that."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said, nodding slowly. "And after that...?"

“Dunno what he did next, but it felt like I was dying. Thought I was bleeding and everything. But Blaise came in and started shaking me, and I’d heard this scream...” The thought of it made him shiver. “Guess that must’ve been him.” Silence settled in the room again, disturbed only by the sound of the slowly opening door.

“Albus?” It was Madame Pomfrey, sounding perplexed. “We’ve found the letter, but—”

“Splendid,” Dumbledore said, though his tone sounded anything but. “I’ll be with you in a moment, then.” Pomfrey nodded and was gone again, and the silence returned briefly, only to be broken by Fawcett’s tentative voice.

“I think that’s about all we need, Mr. Black,” she said quietly, glancing quickly at Dumbledore before she did so. “We’re looking to set the trial date to tomorrow, as it would be to our benefit to get this over with before the papers can get their hands on it and twist it all out of proportion. An easy thing to do, with a lot of your story.” She glanced at Dumbledore again. “Which is why I thought it would be best that your memories testify for you instead.”

“With him in court?” Bella snapped, leaning forward. “Reliving them?”

“He’d be reliving them in his spoken testimony,” Fawcett countered, her tone only a little unsteady as Bella scowled at her. “And besides, pensieve evidence will feel far more immediate, especially when submitted as testimony. I think it would serve his case far more for them to see that diary in action rather than to merely hear him speak of it.”

“In action?”

“Ms. Black, every memory your son gives will be given only at his consent,” Fawcett said firmly, giving Antares a sort of hopeful look. “I wouldn’t ask such a thing if it wouldn’t help.” Bella stayed silent at that, but her arms tightened about him as Fawcett continued to speak. “Now, Mr. Black, I know how hard—”

"I'll do it," Antares said, inwardly thanking Merlin his voice didn't shake. "Anything you need," he added, before his voice could fail him. "Now, or...?"

"In a moment," said Ms. Fawcett, looking not a little surprised. "I..." She licked her lips. "About that snake."

This time, it was Dumbledore that interrupted her. "Actually, Ms. Fawcett, I do have plans for it." Pausing, Dumbledore rose slowly to his feet, his gaze seeming to burn into Antares. "You are a Parselmouth, are you not?"

"Excuse me?" Bella snapped, unwinding her arms from about Antares. "Don't answer that," she ordered him, rising quickly to her feet, her wand appearing in her hand so quickly it nearly poked Antares in the eye. Before she could do anything, Dumbledore had already begun to speak, and was even turning towards the door.

"From what Antares has told us, the snake is hidden behind at least one barrier that cannot be opened without a hissed command," Dumbledore said, making calmly for the door. "He will need to make the first part of the journey with us, at the very least, if we are to succeed. Now if you'll excuse me for a moment..."

The sound of the door shutting was followed by a taut silence. Bella stared at the door, so many emotions passing over her face that Antares stopped trying to make them out. Fawcett cleared her throat and eyed him briefly before turning her cautious gaze to Bella's rigid form. "You know—"

"Don't give me that nonsense about it being beneficial for his trial," Bella spat, giving her a poisonous look. "Don't you *dare*."

"Oh, so you do recognise that it might be," Fawcett said, her tone sharper than Antares had expected. "What on earth are you so worried about? He'll be with the Headmaster, and probably with his Head of House while he opens whatever doors they need to get at that— that thing—"

"Oh, he'll be with the *Headmaster*," Bella said, her words heavy with sarcasm. "And with his Head of House. The same men who, if I recall

correctly, did absolutely *nothing* to stop him being beaten to a pulp by those stupid little demons out in that ward?" She snorted bitterly, putting away her wand with stiff, angry movements. "Please. What kind of fool do you take me for?" Not waiting for an answer, she sat down beside Antares, dragging a shaking hand through her hair.

Moments passed, heavy with tension. Antares ignored Fawcett's beseeching stare, looking up at what he could see of Bella's face through her hair. When she finally looked at him, her eyes were too bright. "Only if I come with you," she said tightly, blinking hard. "Understood?"

Antares nodded jerkily, not trusting his voice. Bella's arm came slowly around him then, warming him as Fawcett shifted uneasily in her chair, no doubt wanting to know his answer.

"So?" she asked quietly, looking from him to Bella and back again. "It won't be dangerous at all, as you can see."

Bella snorted. "As if that would make any difference to him." She shook her head. "Charged a troll once, last year. A troll." She put her other arm around him. "And he won."

"Did he?" Fawcett said, seemingly in spite of herself, for she shook her head and gave Antares a long, hard look. "Well?"

"Yes," Antares said, not daring to look up at his mother. "I'll do it."

The rest of the afternoon plodded by. Fawcett left the room almost immediately after Antares gave his shaky answer, and did not return for a long time. Neither did Dumbledore. Pomfrey came in almost an hour after Fawcett left, followed by floating lunch trays for both Antares and Bella, and she didn't leave until she'd checked Antares with several uncomfortable spells and made several cryptic comments about how little the note that had come with the Cloak had helped.

"They're probably still arguing over it in my office right now," Pomfrey had said when asked about Dumbledore and Snape. Fawcett, on the other hand, was at lunch in the Great Hall. "Likely be here any

moment, ready to get your memories down,” Pomfrey had added, while pouring out a disconcertingly large amount of Reviving potion into a bottle. When she’d handed the full bottle to Bella, Antares hadn’t been able to keep from grimacing. The bottle was nowhere to be seen now, but Antares remembered just how much had seemed to be in it— at least four times as much of the blasted potion in the bottle as he’d drunk in the last few days.

“Might need that tonight, all things considered,” Pomfrey had said, not seeming to notice how still Antares had gone, almost able to feel how raw his throat would feel after drinking all of the horrible potion down. “Keep your eyes open, and you’ll know when.”

Bella had been slow to accept the bottle, weighing it in her hand with the same panicked look Antares now imagined had been on his own face. “You can’t be serious— surely he won’t need eight doses in one night?”

“He might need a dose tomorrow, and a dose or two the next few days after that,” Pomfrey had said, giving his mother a meaningful look. After that, another bottle had been filled with a foul-smelling yellow potion, and Antares had had to force himself to ignore the long sheet of instructions that had been handed over to Bella along with the second bottle. Thankfully, Fawcett had popped in just then, weighed down by a large stone bowl and a small trunk.

The bowl had been easy to identify as the pensieve she would use to collect his memories. The trunk was harder. It floated in the air beside the pensieve, its polished brown top swung open to reveal rows and rows of small, empty bottles with blank labels attached to them by worn black thread. When Fawcett saw Antares eyeing them, she’d taken the time to explain that she’d need to separate his memories and edit them specially so that she’d be able to control what order they would display in during the trial. She’d also said something about them fitting into some sort of pensieve box; that, Antares hadn’t quite understood. *Maybe I’ll ask Bella, when she gets—*

“I really hope you’re not sitting up. Because if you are...,” Bella’s strident tone trailed off as she entered the room and spotted Antares curled around his pillow, and very much laid out in his bed as she’d

left him. “Well, good,” she said, shutting the door behind her with an impatient wave of her hand. “The last thing I want to do is force that Reviving potion down your throat while that snake is stalking us.”

Antares shuddered at the thought, and tried not to think too hard of how easy it was to brush it aside. “I still can’t believe that lawyer’s coming with us.”

“Us, yes; you, no,” Bella said firmly, coming to his side. “As long as you understand that you won’t be crossing the first barrier with us once it’s open, I’m perfectly willing for you to hiss at it all night.”

Antares rolled his eyes. “Yeah, *I’m* the one always going into danger, of course—”

“Be quiet; you know it doesn’t compare in the least.”

“Why not? The snake *petrified* those seventh years just by looking at them!”

“You know, I think I know more about deflecting unwanted sight than four cowardly seventh years,” Bella said, her tone only lightly sarcastic. “Besides, it’ll look good to say I helped. If there was anyone I’d want on our side for now, it would be the school board. All the rest of Britain can call us scum if they like; Morgana knows they won’t be in charge of writing your reference if you’re forced out of Hogwarts.”

“Can that still happen?” Antares asked, hoping he didn’t sound as small as he felt. “Even if the trial goes all right?”

Bella sighed. “Yes, unfortunately.” She sank into the armchair on his left, a very tired look crossing her face. “But if the trial does go well, I can demand a reference from Dumbledore even if they expel you, and you can be sure he’ll give you a bloody good one.”

Antares nodded silently. The pensieve box or, for that matter, the whole trial didn’t seem half as important in the face of being made to leave Hogwarts regardless of whether the school board believed his story or not. Antares shifted onto his back and stared at the ceiling, trying to get his mind around the idea.

Bella didn't help. "France first," she said, musingly. "I've got that job at Gladrags already— they have a branch in Paris, and I'm sure I could arrange for a transfer of some sort." She reached out, taking Antares' hand in hers and squeezing it. "We'll be fine, whatever happens."

Antares couldn't bring himself to nod again. *My friends are here*, he thought. *I'm on the house team. I didn't even get to play one stinking match.*

"What?" When Bella leant closer, some of her hair brushed his face. "Did you say something?"

Antares hesitated for a moment, not sure whether to say yes or no. "It's not eight yet, is it?"

"It wasn't six thirty when I left, Antares. You cast the spell yourself," Bella pointed out. "If there's something you want to do—"

"I was wondering if I could see my friends," Antares said, the words rushing out half before he even realised he'd opened his mouth. Bella frowned and drew back a little, her silence heavy with disapproval. "Look, I know you don't like them—"

"It's not about them, Antares, they're perfectly normal children," Bella said, stiffly. Then, a horrible little pause later, "Well, apart from whatever fiendish desire they have to drag you into all sorts of trouble—"

"Mum—"

"—and they ask you to meddle with their memories, and you say yes," Bella finished, ignoring him. "Useless sort of friend, asking you to endanger yourself for nothing— to put it mildly."

"If they'd known what was wrong, they'd have told someone! If I'd known what was wrong, I'd have told someone! It was my fault just as much as theirs, for fuck's sake."

"And who's on trial now?" Bella half-shouted. "I'll not have you become their shield charm, Antares. No one is worth that. Not me, and certainly not them."

“Ten minutes, Mum. Please.” When his mother made no answer, Antares sighed. “They’re my only friends, I can’t just disappear and not— and not say anything to them. *Please.*”

Bella remained silent, and Antares’ nerve left him. The other things he’d meant to say didn’t come, despite how all he could think of now was how Blaise had always bullied him up here when he needed it, and how Tracey had always saved him a seat. Bella’s voice tore through those memories, hard and flat. “Fifteen minutes. Fifteen and no more, understood?”

Antares nodded fervently. Bella gave him a bitter smile then rose jerkily from the armchair, heading for the door. “Thanks, Mum,” he said, quietly. “I—”

“The only reason I’m bothering is because they brought you here when you needed it,” she snapped, ignoring him. “Fifteen minutes, and no more.”

By the time Blaise and Tracey, looking supremely awkward, had been shepherded into his room by his tight-lipped mother, Antares was cursing himself for bothering at all. Somehow, it had taken all of forty minutes for her to have them found and brought up to his room in the hospital wing. Antares knew it was forty minutes because he’d checked the time every five minutes, biting his lip as he watched the ghostly figures move that much closer to eight o’clock.

Antares swallowed down his nervousness as best as he could, trying to smile at his friends. They didn’t quite smile back, looking without looking at Bella’s taut form by the door as they walked up to his bed and hovered near the foot of it.

“Fifteen minutes,” Bella said— no, *ordered*, as she withdrew from the room. Antares suppressed a flinch as the door slammed shut after her; obviously, she was a good deal more angry at his request than he’d thought. Looking at Tracey’s clenching, nervous hands, he wondered why he’d bothered.

A minute later, he tried to begin to say so. “Look—”

“Shut up, you,” Blaise said rudely, his voice shaky. “We haven’t even apologised yet.”

“And we’re going to,” Tracey said meaningfully, glancing unhappily at the door. “Really.”

Antares stared at them both. “There isn’t really...” he began, but Tracey cut him off.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said, her hands twisting at each other. “I just thought you should know it was me. The Occlumency.” She bit her lip. “Dunno what the use of it was, if I couldn’t keep my mind shut—”

“Against Dumbledore,” Antares said quickly, reaching out in spite of himself to try and calm her fingers. “Stop that, for fuck’s sake. How will you write?”

“She said you might be expelled, you idiot,” Blaise snapped. “Does that even— do you even know?”

“Because of us,” Tracey said, jerking her hands back from his.

“Because of Tom,” Antares said loudly, hoping to wipe the guilty looks off their faces. He found it hard, nevertheless, to look Blaise in the eye as he spoke. “You were right about that diary.”

“And still threatened you into memory charming the both of us,” was the disgusted answer. “Cancelled that bit of common sense right out, didn’t it?”

“The Dark Lord was in that diary,” Antares found himself saying desperately. In the silence that that created, he laughed. “See? It’s not your fault. It’s not.”

The silence stretched for a moment. “You mean...you can’t.” Tracey said. “He’s...” Her face went white, alarmingly so. “That’s not funny.”

“The chicken blood was his idea,” Antares said slowly. “Even that seemed funny at the time.”

Realisation swept across both their faces. Antares looked down at the bedspread, picking at it with a shaking hand. “Most of what he said seemed funny at the time. You know, I used to wonder why people bothered with him, apart from the power. Knowing sucks.”

It was hard not to flinch at the feel of a shaking hand on his shoulder, but the fear soon left Antares as Tracey hugged him, her curly hair tickling his ear. A moment later, another hand was squeezing his shoulder, and he felt Blaise sit down beside him.

“He’s dead, as you might have guessed,” Antares said quickly, mindful of the time that was surely slipping past. Fear gripped him as he thought of the madness he was about to commit down in that cursed toilet. As safe as everyone had been trying to make it seem, how were they to know if that monstrous snake wouldn’t be waiting for them when he opened the barrier? It might even still be out, muttering of hunger. He could just see it stuffed inside one of the clean stalls, emerging from beneath the door, ready to strike—

“How?” Tracey drew back from him, curiosity and fear in her eyes. “I mean— how did— how could *You-know-who* have got in there? And how did you—”

“Still don’t know,” Antares said, shrugging heavily. “No one’s told me anything, though I’m starting to think I’m just lucky. Crazy lucky.” He bit his lip. “I do know the diary was Lucius Malfoy’s, though.”

“But you had it when term started,” Blaise said, confused. “How—”

“Don’t remember that stupid article about me and my mum? You know, how the *Prophet* started everyone beating me to shreds.”

“Antares—”

“If you apologise for that, I’ll hit you,” Antares said, glaring at both of them. “Wasn’t your fault. Wasn’t my fault. He must’ve stuck it in my new Transfig book while we were in the bookshop. Morgana knows he had the time.” Tracey began to speak, but he shook his head, silencing her. “I’ve probably only got a minute left,” he said bitterly. “Leave me your Floo grate numbers, and I’ll try to talk to you after the trial.”

Tracey, who had already started to rummage in her pockets for quill and parchment, stopped and stared. "You're coming back after the trial," she said, not sounding very hopeful. "Aren't you?"

Antares tried to stitch together something that could convey everything that could go wrong before or during the trial, and found he couldn't. Shaking his head, he gave Blaise a pointed look. "Grate numbers, come on. My Mum'll be here any minute..."

The door opened almost as soon as he said that, but it was Pomfrey who stuck her head round it. "It's eight, Mr. Black. Your mother is waiting for you."

"You can't be going already," Tracey whispered, snatching looks at Antares as she scribbled down her number just under Blaise's in a scrawl that Antares hoped wasn't as unreadable as it looked. "I mean—"

"Not just yet," Antares agreed, but he didn't bother telling them why. No point in worrying them any further. "Blaise, my shoes are...yeah, there. Thanks," he said to both of them, accepting the folded, tatty parchment and his dirty boots at the same time. "I'll write, okay? If I can't Floo-oomph!" Breathing became hard for a moment as Tracey attacked him again. "Better send me pictures," he said, trying not to get any of Tracey's hair in his mouth. His voice sounded muffled to his ears in comparison to Blaise's flat, too-loud answer.

"Pictures of what?" he repeated. Tracey, letting go of Antares already, stopped to listen.

"Of whatever you end up doing to Draco," Antares said, trying to be quiet. Pomfrey hadn't closed the door, and for all he knew, she could be standing right outside. "Seriously, send some." Blaise and Tracey said nothing, exchanging a meaningful look. "Don't do anything too bad," Antares said, whispering on purpose. When they looked at him, surprised, he smiled. "Leave that to me."

Blaise nodded; Tracey matched his smile. On her, it looked nastier than anything Antares thought he himself could muster, and it somehow made him grin as they needlessly helped him up from the bed, Tracey hugging him yet again.

The grin dropped off his face as soon as they left the little room, almost bumping into Bella's stiff frame on their way out. A few awkward minutes followed, ending with Antares' hand in Bella's viselike grip, and Blaise and Tracey hurrying nervously out of the hospital wing, not even pausing to stare at what Pomfrey was doing to Rachel Rookwood. The matron looked up as Bella shut the door, pausing the flow of pink, watery potion she was guiding in an arc from a bowl into Rookwood's stained, slightly open mouth.

"We're ten minutes late," Bella said coolly, sweeping a too-long cloak around Antares and knotting it with a charm. "I thought I told you you had fifteen, and only fifteen."

"You took your time finding them," Antares said, wriggling out of her grasp.

"Can you blame me? I haven't walked these halls in twenty years, you know."

"You went to find them? But—"

"Professor Snape is busy shoring up the castle defences, as are the other Heads of House," Bella said sarcastically. "A precaution and nothing more— that was what the Headmaster said, eh Pomfrey?" Madame Pomfrey nodded grimly, waving the half-empty bowl away to a shelf at the other end of the room. "If I'd a Portkey, I'd pack you away as soon as you were done with that stupid barrier."

"Barriers," Antares found himself saying, not wanting to think why he felt so certain there were two. When Bella stared at him, he swallowed. "There are two. Didn't I say...?"

Bella inhaled sharply. "No," she said, through gritted teeth. "No, you did not."

"What about that dream I had?" Antares pointed out. "There were two then."

"Possession dreams are neither here or there as proof," Pomfrey said, her tone almost soothing. Antares strongly suspected she wasn't

really talking to him, and the way Bella's grip on his hand eased confirmed it. "We should probably be off."

Antares blinked. "You're coming too?"

"This little jaunt's already dangerous enough," Bella snapped, tugging at his hand. "Last thing we need is badly cast medical spells, if anything happens. Come *on*, Antares." Antares followed, feeling both cross and subdued at the way she was treating him. You'd think he'd come out and begged to be let in on sorting the snake, instead of merely sat there and unavoidably been the most convenient Parselmouth to hand. His crossness all but disappeared as they stepped out and waited as Pomfrey locked the door to the hospital wing— as irritating as the cloak he'd been given was, he was quite grateful for it in the corridor, which was surprisingly cold.

"*Tempus*— Merlin be damned, eight fifteen," Bella muttered. Pomfrey started off down the corridor, and Antares found himself being pulled after her by his mother, who hadn't even bothered to wave away the solid-looking letters now floating uselessly behind her. He glanced at them over his shoulder, wondering how much she'd put into that spell to make them so, and began to shiver uncontrollably. Suddenly, it was all too much. Antares couldn't seem to stop himself from slowing down, couldn't seem to stop thinking about how easy it was to shove aside the dark, fearful thoughts trying to cling to him.

Bella didn't slap him when he stopped, though he half expected her to. For a moment, she looked very much like she wanted to, staring wordlessly down at him, anger thick in the air between them. Then a warm, strange look spread across her face, and when she tugged on his hand this time, she did it gently.

"Come on," she said, and Antares found that he could.

They reached the girl's toilet all too soon. Antares' last stop, longer than both the ones that had followed it, hadn't seemed to slow them down at all. He barely got himself through the door, the sight of Professor Flitwick, Professor Snape, Professor Sprout and Professor McGonagall clustered silently around it not helping in the least. Antares fancied he could feel their eyes burning through the door as it closed behind him, Bella and Pomfrey, and was so deep in that fancy

that he heard Dumbledore speak his name five times before he realised he was being spoken to.

And then he was led to a sink with a roughly carved snake on it, trying not to resist Bella's firm guidance as he drew nearer to it. The sudden familiarity of it almost rooted him to the spot.

"Mr. Black," Dumbledore said, kindly. Firmly. "If you would—"

"*Open*," Antares hissed, instinctively. A strange detachment fell on him as he watched the sink become a dark, frightening hole, and the warmth of Bella's hand tugging on his shoulder startled him. He stepped back, stifling the panic that arose as he realised how *close* he was to the hole, to the snake, to— to—

"...think it best that I go first," Dumbledore was saying. The look he gave Antares was strange, and even stranger was how he set a hand on his shoulder before stepping between him and the gaping hole. "I'll send for you if there is indeed a second barrier, but otherwise..."

Bella drew Antares to her. The feel of her hand stroking his hair made it easier to watch as the Headmaster stepped into the hole and seemed to float down, disappearing in minutes. Antares heard himself speaking, and cringed at how shaky and strange he sounded. "That wasn't how I went down."

Pomfrey gave a short laugh, the sound at odds with their dim, wandlit surroundings and utterly alien to the dark hole she was very carefully not looking at. "He likes to show off at moments like these," she explained wryly, giving Antares a half-smile. "He once told me no one would take him seriously if he didn't waste magic like that during a crisis. Can you imagine?" Antares couldn't, and couldn't understand why his mother was nodding slowly, an almost-smile on her face. "Although I don't expect he'll need very much, even against a magic snake."

"It's huge," Antares said quietly, feeling frustrated with her almost light tone. "Really, it is."

"Even so," Pomfrey said, shrugging slightly. "And besides—"

But Antares wasn't listening any longer. He was itching all over, and the air smelled sharp and thick enough to choke on. He looked up at Bella and wasn't comforted by the way she was staring at the hole. She was so still—

Boom. The area around the hole rippled disquietingly, though the stone was still under their feet and looked perfectly normal away from where the snake-marked sink had been.

"Localisation boundary in effect," Pomfrey said reassuringly. "Smart thing to do, really— wherever that snake lives must be near the foundations." She gave Antares a kind look. "It upset me dreadfully the first time I saw one—"

"Look out!" Bella said, cutting her off. Antares flinched hard, simultaneously spotting the glowing hole at the same time as Bella drew her wand. The next moment, he was shoved behind her, but even that couldn't stop him seeing the yellow light of whatever it was that was coming out of the hole. His mother lowered her wand, and a deep fear held him fast in place as she slowly turned to him.

Then he saw the phoenix, and understood. "Isn't that—"

"Yes," Pomfrey said, cautiously. "I expect the Headmaster's found another barrier down below."

Bella made no answer. She was too busy glaring hatefully at the phoenix, which had perched at the lip of the hole and was looking pointedly at Antares. It was a long, stiff moment before she looked at Antares again. "I'm going first." Her tone brooked no argument, so Antares hung back, nervously watching as Bella stepped into the hole, ignoring the phoenix now hovering just above her. She slid away so fast that it took his breath away, and he didn't think he would have made for the hole if Pomfrey hadn't nudged him then, looking calm.

"On with you, then," Pomfrey said, grudgingly. She made for the door and opened it as he climbed in gingerly, no doubt meaning to tell the professors standing outside what was happening, so was not there to see how the phoenix suddenly began to claw him as he began to slide down. Fear beat at him, mingling with the pain from his scratched arm, and he let go quicker than he'd have liked. The

sensation of sliding away into the slimy darkness only made it worse, and though he knew it was useless, Antares found himself scrabbling for purchase. He grabbed the first solid thing he felt, and found himself holding on to the feathery, slippery tail of the phoenix.

It trilled at him crossly, flapping its wings, and squawked when he started to lessen his grip on its tail. Antares, irritated and afraid, would have cursed but for the strange, light feeling spreading through him. His slide down the pipe slowed, but he found he didn't mind; the phoenix had begun to sing, and that seemed to settle the restless layers of his mind into place. Towards the end, he even began to glance down the pipes branching off from the one he was in. Though it all looked alarmingly familiar, none of it had been in his first dream about the snake. And since the thing about there being a second barrier had proved right, it was disturbing to think that this bit had been left out. It would be just like Tom to deny him the memory of a dangerous obstacle here on purpose, just in case he got ideas about trying to go down on his own.

The thought chilled him, making him shiver as the pipe seemed to level out. Antares looked up at the phoenix, which was now silent, wondering how on earth and why on earth it had done this for him. Moments later, his legs were in the open, and he had to endeavour to keep from banging his head on the pipe as he slowly slid out the end. He ended up twisting horribly at the phoenix's tail as he slid out, and hastily let go once he realised what he was doing. His weight seemed to press in on him in a rush, depositing him on his arse on the slimy floor. Somehow, the hand he'd held on to the phoenix with was free of tail feathers, and only a little scratched.

"I see Fawkes made himself useful," Dumbledore said, sounding a little rueful. Before Antares could say anything, hands were lifting him to his feet in the darkness of the tunnel. Even better, he heard Bella whisper the familiar words for her favourite cleaning spell. A moment later, Fawkes was perched on Dumbledore's shoulder and staring down at Antares and Bella as they followed him into the tunnel, hand in hand.

Bones crunched under their feet— well, under Bella's feet, and under the Headmaster's. Antares stepped over them, navigating the bone-

strewn floor with dull familiarity. No one spoke. Bella's only reaction to the huge snakeskin they encountered was nothing more than a sharp intake of breath; Professor Dumbledore barely seemed to notice it, except to clamber over it with the agility of a much younger man. Antares began to shiver then, feeling the stiff, slippery coils beneath his feet. He didn't stop shivering until they reached the wall and stood before the serpents, their jewelled eyes flickering slightly in the light that seemed to pour from Fawkes.

Bella squeezed Antares' shoulder. "Go on," she whispered. "The sooner this is done..."

Antares took a deep breath and, trying to blink away the odd feeling that the serpents' entwined bodies should have been lower on the wall, hissed. "*Open up.*"

The wall cracked apart, the silent movement of its two halves giving way to a thunderous hiss. "*The heir is DEAD!*" something spat, from somewhere beyond the doors. Antares felt himself shoved behind Bella before he knew what was going on, and the world darkened abruptly around them as Dumbledore brought his wand down in a sharp, final wave. Even the light of the phoenix was gone.

Not that it matters, Antares found himself thinking. *It'll sniff us out, I know it will—*

Something was moving towards them, sliding heavily across the floor. It was coming from the chamber ahead, the chamber Antares could see in his mind's eye, though it was black here, invisible in the darkness. In his mind, it was green; Green to match the snake, green for Slytherin. Green for death.

And death was certainly on the snake's mind, for it was still hissing, rage and determination weighting every syllable of its words. "*I shall not be bound,*" it hissed, becoming louder as it got closer. "*I SHALL NOT!*"

"Close the doors," Dumbledore said urgently. A hand gripped Antares' shoulder and shook it, hard. "Close them!"

"I can't!" Antares tried to say back, but Dumbledore didn't seem to hear him. Only Bella held him now, muttering dark, unintelligible words in chanting rhythm. The darkness before them was shimmering, and there was a soft, deadly light shining through the doors next to them. "Dumbledore! I can't close them!"

A massive grinding set up, forcing Antares' eyes shut with fear. The snake spat once, twice, and slowed to a stop, the heavy sound of its body dangerously close. Antares shook in his mother's arms, and distantly wondered why on earth neither of them was doing anything to stop the snake. When Bella's arms fell from around him, he clutched at them in fear and shock. "What's happening? Why aren't you *doing* anything?"

"Breathe properly, Antares, for god's sake," Bella's hands came up to his face and paused there, shaking. "See, that's better, isn't it?" Sighing, she crushed him to her. "God above, we're lucky."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that just yet," Dumbledore said dryly. "I suppose its being safely trapped in that chamber would be too much to hope for," he continued, as if the snake wasn't less than a foot away. "Any...insight on that, Mr. Black?"

The almost light tone of that convinced Antares to open his eyes. The doors were a wall again, miraculously, and the tunnel was snake-free, and dimly lit by light from the end of Dumbledore's wand. Bella had just stepped away from Antares and was staring at the wall, her wand still levelled at the snake they could no longer see. Its angry, cheated hiss came to them almost as clearly as if it was in the tunnel with them.

"There are pipes everywhere," Antares said, voice shaking. When Dumbledore said nothing, he gave voice to the fear that now held him in its grip. "I think there might even be a space somewhere in this wall—"

"*No distance is too great,*" the snake was spitting, sounding so sure that Antares shivered. "*So long as you hunt me, I shall hunt you; you and your brood shall die.*"

“Mr. Black?” Dumbledore was asking, sounding concerned, his voice only just louder than the snake’s deep hiss. “You are still speaking Parseltongue, I believe.”

Antares looked up at him, confused. “But I—”

“Still, Mr. Black,” Dumbledore said, sighing. He looked musingly at the wall, ignoring the further hissed threats of the snake. “The snake’s presence is so strong— perhaps there is a binding effect?”

Bella looked at him questioningly. “If it’s presence is so strong, how come you didn’t sense it before?”

“I think I know,” Dumbledore said, his eyes coming to rest on Antares. “Mr. Black, is the snake speaking to you? Nod once for yes, twice for no.” Antares nodded once, breathing hard, and Dumbledore sighed, looking back at Bella. “This is only a guess,” he said, “but it’s very likely that the diary’s destruction somehow triggered the collapse of the binding spells that might have been set on the snake.”

“It may be magical, but it is only a snake,” Bella said, shooting a dark look at the entwined pair that seemed to watch them passively from the wall. “And that diary wasn’t really the Dark Lord anyway, so—”

“It was close enough,” Dumbledore said, cutting her off. “Close enough to matter to the spells set on the snake, I’ll wager. Unless we’d be in that chamber right now, possibly needing to have your son coax it out like he did in his dream.” The Headmaster sighed forcefully. “This complicates things.”

“Complicates— oh, for god’s sake, the thing’s trapped behind that wall!”

“Not for long, I think,” Dumbledore said, sighing again. “Mr. Black, do you believe the snake could find its way out into the school?” Antares had to fight to keep himself from nodding more than once— the snake was now delivering a long and gruesome threat, and the smug rage of its tone as it settled on the other side of the wall didn’t give Antares the impression that it thought it was trapped. “Well, then. I don’t suppose it can hear you...?”

Antares stared at him for a long moment. He turned away when Dumbledore's strangely— no, *crazily* hopeful expression didn't change. Looking around them for something, anything that could somehow help this horrible situation, he realised that Fawkes was gone. "Where is it?" he asked stupidly, his voice too loud in the darkness.

"In my mouth," the snake hissed, disdainfully. Some instinct told Antares that it was laughing now. That had to be wrong; that was surely a sound more bloodthirsty than amused. Now, add that to the fact that the phoenix was definitely gone— *"Come here, and you shall see."*

Antares gulped and nodded once. When he snatched a look at Dumbledore, that horrible look was still on his face. "What do you expect me to do?" he said uselessly. "It hates me. It says it'll eat me—"

The snake pounded itself against the wall, sending a tremor through it. *"You were not so cowardly before, with the heir by your side,"* it said, dredging up more of that frightening, hissy laughter. *"His egg is broken; yours is cracked, and will soon break."*

"You think I wanted him alive?" Antares found himself saying, suddenly realising who it was the snake was speaking of. "If he had a body, I'd be kicking it." The snake fell silent at that, and the sliding sounds on the other side of the wall stilled. "Curse that, I'd be *burning* it," Antares went on, the absurdity of his words falling away momentarily as he pictured Tom's still, dead face blistering in the heat, blackening. Tom's inhuman scream came back to him, melding with the strange, distorted picture of his imaginary death by fire, spreading a dense, strange satisfaction in Antares' chest. It coated his next few words, dripped from them. "He died screaming."

The snake stirred again. *"Painfully, then."* Next to the pleasure in that tone, Antares' small satisfaction seemed plain and simple. The snake stilled again, and now its voice was closer. *"Did he hunger?"*

Antares thought for a moment, remembering the way Tom had given him chances when there'd really been no point. For some incomprehensible reason, Tom had wanted him to come willing, to do

as he was asked. Antares thought now that Tom would eventually have killed him regardless of whether he'd chosen to obey. But then, when he'd asked for the last time... "Yes," he decided, only half aware that he was saying it out loud. "Yes."

The snake laughed, loudly. Somehow, it didn't sound half as frightening now as it did before. "*Then I am avenged,*" it declared, drawing the words out, as if weighing them on its monstrous tongue. "*You have brought me good news, small coward; you and your brood may leave. But bring me food or do not enter here, unless you still seek your treasure in my mouth.*" A great slithering set up, growing louder for a brief moment, then slowly diminishing. The snake, apparently, was gone, and Antares was staring at a wall with nothing behind it, his hands extended uselessly toward it. He drew them back, embarrassed and afraid— imagine if touching the wall had done something, had opened the door again.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Will it follow us?"

"No," Antares said automatically, then, remembering the simple code Dumbledore had asked him to follow, nodded twice.

"Ah," was the calm answer. "What did it say?" When Antares stared at him, confused as to how to answer that with nods, Dumbledore shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Sorry— we can understand you now. If you will...?"

"It's happy that Tom's dead," Antares said slowly, trying to feel the difference. There was no difference between speaking now and before; it baffled him. "It told me to feed it if I ever come down again, else it'll eat me." He grinned weakly at Bella, who was staring at him. "It also said we could go."

Dumbledore sighed. "More complications," he muttered. "*Tempus...* how can it only be nine o'clock?" He sighed again. "A sign, I suppose."

"But you just said it could get out into the school," Bella pointed out, gesturing at the wall with her wand. "It could already be waiting for us at the entrance!"

“Which is why I took the precaution of obtaining a Portkey,” Dumbledore said, rummaging in his robe pockets, a tired frown on his face. “Now, once I find it...”

“What about that phoenix of yours?” Bella demanded, crossing her arms across her chest. “Why on earth is it gone?” Antares gulped. *Come here, and you shall see*, the snake had said. It had also called the phoenix his treasure, but that was sort of neither here nor there, considering that the snake very likely had no idea who Dumbledore was. Then again—

“A planned precaution,” Dumbledore said calmly, now patting down his voluminous robe sleeves. Antares blinked, then began to relax. That sounded more likely. Comforting, too; as powerful as phoenixes tended to be, he couldn’t help but doubt that one would find it easy to beat that huge snake. And with that thought, Antares relaxed completely— strong as it was, that snake couldn’t have swallowed a phoenix without a loud, noisy fight.

“Planned precaution?” Bella was asking, sharply. “Against what?”

“Not quite a precaution, Bellatrix,” Dumbledore corrected hastily. “Just...a sort of signal, really, in case I didn’t have time to get a good look at the snake.”

Bella sighed impatiently. “*And?*”

“More bad news, I’m afraid, but that can wait till we’re out.” Dumbledore, said, giving Antares a sideways look. “Which is why accepting the snake’s gracious favour is a good idea. Aha— there.” He held forth an unremarkable little quill, waiting patiently until Bella and Antares grasped the other end. “Right, then,” Dumbledore muttered, as soon as they had taken hold. “Gibberish.” Some long, nauseous moments later, Antares was being helped to his feet by a silent, nervous-looking Bella, and they were all being stared at by Snape, McGonagall, Pomfrey, Sprout, Flitwick and— not surprisingly— Ms. Fawcett, standing slightly apart from the others. As Dumbledore slipped away the Portkey into a pocket, Antares found himself distantly glad that they weren’t in the toilet, which would have been uncomfortably crowded with all of them inside it.

"It seems," Dumbledore began quietly, his strangely formal tone drawing all their eyes to him, "that we are possessed of a basilisk." Almost everyone gasped; Bella's grip became painful, and though she remained silent, she had gone quite pale. "From the testimony of Mr. Black, I surmise that the basilisk was placed within the school by our own founder, Slytherin." Dumbledore's tone became louder and less formal. "It granted us the grace to leave; I decided its grace should not be tested, so here we are." An awkward silence settled on them as the professors engaged shocked, frantic looks and stared at Antares, obviously wondering if he'd been somehow instrumental in getting that grace.

Fawcett cleared her throat, looking nervously around, and everyone's eyes fell upon her. "I was going to apologise for being late," she said slowly, looking wonderingly at Antares. "I find I cannot." Her fearful gaze turned to Dumbledore. "A *basilisk*?"

"I made arrangements for a crude warning of sorts, knowing a basilisk to be the only snake with such a dangerous gaze," Dumbledore said calmly. "My phoenix accompanied us, and left as agreed as soon as he sensed the basilisk as it began to approach us." He sighed. "And, considering the size, colour and markings of the shed snakeskin we passed underground..." He rummaged again in his pockets, and was soon handing a small jar filled with slivers of vivid, scaly green skin to a very still Professor Snape. "For testing, Professor."

The way Snape was staring at the jar of skin said clearly that he didn't think it needed any, but he nodded jerkily all the same, holding the jar away from him by its tightly closed lid and giving it short, careful looks.

Dumbledore was speaking again. "...won't be easy, dealing with it. We'll await Professor Snape's results before revealing the snake to the Ministry, I think. For now, we'll have to settle for containing it."

"Here at Hogwarts?" Fawcett said, aghast. "Here in the school?"

"Removing it from its chamber without injury to it or ourselves will probably be impossible," Dumbledore said, his eyes landing firmly on her. "Doubly impossible, perhaps, considering that we have no idea what binding spells on it have been broken and which ones are intact.

Unbreakable curses were widely used to secure property at that time; considering the many legends surrounding Salazar Slytherin's departure from Hogwarts, an Unbreakable tied to the murder of the snake is almost assured. Luck and phoenix tears— which we would have in abundance— are no substitute for planning for such a situation.” He paused, looking round at each of the professors. His gaze ended up on Bella, and he began to speak again. “While my heads of house discuss plans for containment amongst themselves, I’d be happy to give you my memory of the event, Ms. Fawcett.”

“What? Why? Surely—”

“It is through Antares’ effort that we were allowed to leave the basilisk’s lair, Ms. Fawcett,” Dumbledore said, his eyes still on Bella, whose colour was slowly returning. “After all, I am not, and have never been a Parselmouth. We are lucky to have had one so close to hand, and willing to help us.”

Bella straightened, and her grip on Antares lessened, but not quite for the reason Antares expected. “A pretty speech, Headmaster, but I’m afraid Antares’ willingness to help,” she drew out the words sarcastically “is at an end.” In the silence that met her words, Bella looked down at Antares. “You’re going to bed,” she said quietly, “if I have to drag you every step of the way there.”

“And leave us without a Parselmouth?” Sprout snapped, giving Bella a look of disbelief. “How exactly do you think we’ll contain anything without his help? We’ll *need* him down there—”

“Over my dead body,” Bella said smoothly, pulling gently at Antares’ frozen arm. “Come, dear.”

“I won’t argue that the boy needs rest,” Flitwick said stiffly, moving discreetly to block their way towards the stairs. “However—”

The look that Bella gave him stopped his tongue. “When,” she said slowly, “he has had some sleep. And when his trial is over, and when he has been pardoned, and has in his possession any references he needs to continue the life you have not paid attention to when he needed it—”

Pomfrey moved to Antares' side and took his other arm, giving Flitwick a steady look. He stepped aside.

"—*then*," Bella finished, her tone frigidly polite, "then, we may speak of containing basilisks." She glared at the other three professors, and gave Dumbledore a hard look. "Good night."

Silence swallowed Antares' steps. Bella's were too loud and angry to fade in the dark of the corridors, and Pomfrey's were too firm. Neither of them spoke as they headed for the hospital wing. Antares, on the other hand, found it extremely hard not to fill the close silence with nervous questions until they entered the ward. The stiff figures lined up on one side of the room ate every word he had, so that he stayed silent when Bella, tucking him into bed, asked if he was all right.

She answered his question for him, after a moment. "You're not," she said, quietly. "I know— I know how that feels. But," she pressed a kiss to his cheek, "I also know it will pass, in time. I want you to think of that, as you sleep. Hold that, and you will be all right."

One look into her eyes brought all the questions back. "But there's so much I don't *know*," Antares said, trying not to think of how choked he sounded. It was stupid, really, how just not *knowing* hurt and bewildered him right now, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. So much had changed, and it was barely a month into his second year here. Here that he liked. Here that he was on the Quidditch team, had been respected just a little, had had friends. To think that it all could go, just like that...really, really hurt. "I just want to know," he managed to say. "I just want to. *Please*."

Bella brushed his hair back from his face, her hand shaking slightly. When she began her reply, her hand fell still. "I'll tell you," she said, voice low. "Not just yet, though. Not tonight."

"But you will tell me?" Antares pressed, unable to help himself. "Tomorrow?"

Bella's slow nod made him sigh, made it easy to close his eyes and eventually fall asleep. But tomorrow spread into his dreams, hooking wicked little claws into every fragment, making everyone talk in Ts and Ms and scrawling the word on the floor in blood. By the time

Antares woke, he was wild with the idea of tomorrow, and what it might bring. Bella smiled over him when he reached out and woke her, worrying only a little about how stiff she'd get if she had to sleep in that armchair by him any longer, and, of course, about what she'd promised.

"You'll tell me?" he asked, as soon as he was sure he would be understood. "Tomorrow...?"

Bella's smile widened. "Today," she said, stretching sleepily, and somehow, that was enough.

A/N: Good god on a stick. Firstly, I'm sorry I've led you all such a merry chase till now. I think the only thing I can blame now is this damn story, having already blamed myself. It just won't let me set it aside, somehow. Hopefully, some of this was worth the wait. If I don't finish the next chapter, I think I'll blame my computer chair next, just to be safe. Then I can blame it if I give up again and return and finish another chapter again.

Anyway, I liked writing that. I suppose that's really all that matters. This chapter produced courtesy my evil story, plus a well-timed (or ill-timed, depending on how you look at it) nudge from chattypandagurl on the very frigging post in which I pronounced all as lost.

Chapter 12: The Finish

By the time Rita had transformed and crawled to and into her messy bed, the shivers were going down. Everything still seemed too small, but that was always slow to wear off after long periods in her other form, and therefore nothing to worry about. The real worry was that if she shifted into a more comfortable position, she'd be sick.

It was several minutes before she moved. The pinpricks she always saw after changing were starting to diminish, but her vision still seemed to cover too small an area. Her eyes glanced this way and that, dipping into the low well of energy she'd nearly drained by following batty old Bagshot and Ian Tatting up and down Diagon Alley. She forced her eyes closed and kept them so for a minute— there. That did nicely for the dratted beetle habit of examine everything around her even while at rest, but didn't quite stop the shivers or the vague sense of nausea.

Rita sighed. Well, until someone invented some sort of dicta-quill small enough for a beetle to use, using memory-enhancing potion would have to do for investigations carried out as a beetle. It magnified the after-effects of working hard in beetle form almost exponentially, making her remember far too much of what it was like to be a beetle for hours after, but it also meant that she could collapse into her bed for that time and not have forgotten a single detail of what she'd witnessed when it was time to write it down.

Which reminded her. "Quill," Rita managed to mumble, putting the necessary command behind it. Something rustled loudly to her left— *parchment*, she told herself, barely stifling the need to look in that direction. Her favourite quill was already tickling at her hand, helping to distract her further from the now-quiet parchment that her beetle brain insisted was important to look at. Soon, there was parchment settling itself beneath the Quick-Quotes quill, and it was time to dictate.

"Re-readers familiar with Bathilda Bagshot's...ah...leanings for the old and venerable in wizarding history will not be altogether surprised at the family name— strike last two words, surname of her newest paramour. Pause." Rita coughed as gently as she could manage,

then wiped at her irritatingly watering eyes before she continued. “Continue. They will, however, be surprised, nay, *shocked*, at his first name...”

Once she’d started, it wasn’t too hard to keep going. This particular batch of memory potion had been strong— the details of the last few hours seemed spread before her on her tatty duvet. Rita soon became too lost in retelling them to notice in time to stop the quill from beginning to write on the bed whenever it needed new parchment.

Like now.

Curses found their way onto the faded lilac cotton for a few moments. They were soon erased. And, after some effort, the quill floated gently above the parchment, re-charmed not to drip and charmed to squeak when it ran out of parchment. Rita sighed, wondering for the hundredth time why on *earth* Quick-Quote quills were so bloody resistant to simple, relevant charms, and had to compose herself for a moment before the memories would spread out before her again.

Soon enough, the task of getting them down was over with no more mishaps from the quill. Rita cursed at it under her breath as she transferred it back to her desk with a jerky swish of her wand, and sighed in relief that the urge to watch its progress to its destination wasn’t strong enough to keep her eyes open. She slumped backwards and was grateful to let them close altogether.

Unfortunately, the memory potion being as strong as it was, she found herself on Diagon Alley once asleep, buzzing silently up and down as she waited for Bagshot to stop snogging her new lover. Somehow, she ended up flying in for a closer look— something she did not recall doing— and suddenly realised she was Ian Tatting now, and that Bathilda Bagshot’s lips felt as dry as parchment beneath hers. And ugh, they tasted of ink—

“Rita!”

Rita groaned. She despised nonsensical dreams— such a waste of time, really, especially when Bagshot could bloody well be

transforming into Ian Tatting, who was as hot as Bagshot was haughty. And *still* with the papery lips—

“Rita, wake up!”

Oh god, not Jane, Rita begged the dream. It ignored her, manufacturing Jane’s commanding, bossy tone in the excited tone she was wont to thrust on Rita at inappropriate moments—

“No, don’t you turn over again, you great cow!” Jane was all but shouting now. “Wake the bloody hell *up*!”

Rita’s hand groped warily upwards, just the same. She found nothing but pillow and— *ugh*, parchment, stuck to her face.

“That’s more like it,” Jane said, her voice shredding the last of Rita’s hazy, irritating dream about her. “God, get *up*, I don’t have time—”

“This better be important,” Rita snapped, interrupting. Jesus, this was *not* the day for interrupted sleep, not when she had to sleep off the fucking memory potion and the nausea. *Why on earth can’t she just—*

“...Antares Black is being expelled, you idiot!” What Rita could see of Jane’s face among the green flames in her fireplace twisted into a triumphant scowl as she sat up. “Important enough for you? Because I—”

Rita, beyond words, waved frantically at her until she stopped. “*When?*”

“Tomorrow,” Jane snapped. Rita looked around for the clock, and felt herself go still with excitement. *Today, practically*. “And I’d better be going if I want to be awake to actually see it—”

“What charges?” Rita asked plaintively, stumbling out of bed. “I’m sorry I snapped, love...”

“Sure you are,” Jane said, looking mollified...instead of talking about the *charges*. “It’s geas-worthy, Rita.”

Rita opened her mouth, then closed it. "Why isn't he already expelled?"

"No idea," Jane said, shaking her head. Her new hairdo looked hilarious in the flames, but Rita was far too excited to snicker at the spring-spring of Jane's glossy, manufactured curls even now— a geas-worthy set of charges was a front page story for *weeks*. "*And* it's not final, somehow. I think that's why Headmaster Dumbledore's coming down; to see it gets done."

Rita blinked hard, and shook her head. "Doesn't fit. Who'd stand up for the boy, eh? Who's usually at the small governor meets again?" Jane glared at her. "Humour me, Jane, I can never keep that straight—"

"There's a schedule, Rita— look it up sometime, for god's sake."

"Jane!"

Jane huffed. "Fawcett, Grimstone, Ogden, Dobbs, Summers and Malfoy. Just the six of them; it's a half-session."

Rita was already shaking her head. "Definitely doesn't fit," she said to no one in particular. "Malfoy would die happy if that brat was run out of Hogwarts, and I can't see anyone but Doreen Summers even caring if it's all done legally. And *maybe* Grimstone, she's young enough to pity him. But if his mother's in attendance..."

"Oh, she'll be there," Jane said, nodding. "Applied to me by Floo for a front seat."

"Why on earth? It's closed to the public; only Dumbledore and maybe—"

"Actually, it's not. Why d'you think I've suffered your bloody muttering for so long? You can come, Rita, just don't come as yourself."

"But why—"

"Malfoy came down here as soon as he got the details for tomorrow," Jane said, sounding annoyed. Rita turned to stare at her as she

continued on. "He popped in by Floo minutes after. Filed a motion carried by unanimous vote of the board members that'll be there that the hearing be open to the public."

Rita had to force herself to breathe, let alone look properly at Jane. "He called you 'clerk' again, didn't he?"

"Two fucking years, I've worked here," Jane said darkly. "I may be a gossip, but I know how to do my bloody job. *Ogden* never fails to ask me about my mum, batty as he is."

"Prepared, was he?" Rita muttered to herself, letting her imagination draw up the scene. Jane would be flitting confusedly round and about her small office, trying to get the rolls and rolls of parchment that serious trials always produced. Lucius Malfoy's entrance by Floo would be graceful, perhaps; he would apologise for making her jump. "Well, except for your name." Jane snorted. "Stupid of him, since you could easily have forgotten to file his little request." Rita smiled wickedly. "Of course, you didn't, did you? Merlin, you're invaluable."

"Really and truly?"

"Oh, yes," Rita said, now eyeing the Floo powder pot above her fireplace. "Lend me your pensieve after, will you?"

"Lend me your account number for an hour in Gladrags next week, and you can have it all summer," Jane said, smiling slyly. "The *rumours*, Rita. Everyone's saying Olive Bernard's new line'll beat Malkins' into the ground."

"You might want to ask for something else, you know," Rita said, grinning. "I doubt that Bellatrix Black will be long there if her son's expelled from Hogwarts."

"Spoilsport," Jane groused. "God, my knees hurt."

"I'll buy you the finest murtlap essence I can scrounge, darling," Rita said, just to annoy her. Jane just rolled her eyes and was gone, leaving the way clear for Rita to inflict an early-morning call on someone far more important—her editor. Being no stranger to his notorious indecision, she made sure to cast a strong cushioning

charm on the hearth before kneeling and casting the powder into her uncomfortably warm fire.

“Barnabas Cuffe’s residence,” she rattled off, taking care not to roll her eyes as she did so. As much as she mocked Barney’s house’s unoriginal Floo Register name in private, she’d always been careful to keep such insults as far from his ears as she possibly could. And coming from a family as paranoid as his, it was only natural that he might put some sort of shady monitoring spell on his Floo connection.

Rita sighed. *Now, how to go about this without getting hexed...*

It was surprisingly easy. Barney was at the fireplace well before she’d begun to get hoarse from shouting for him, and he looked quite sane, if quite sleepy and quite vastly irritated at her intrusion. Knowing her time for explanation to be short, Rita launched into her story as soon as he seemed within certain hearing distance.

“A trusted source Flooed me news that Antares Black is as good as expelled just minutes ago,” she said, as quietly as possible. “A very trusted source.”

Barney’s mouth, which had fallen open at the first mention of the name ‘Black’, closed abruptly. “Where’s the article?”

“In your hands, tomorrow— well, now tonight.”

“*Tonight?*”

“As good as expelled, Mr. Cuffe. Quite different from surely expelled. I—”

“And what’s to stop you from speculating, Rita? Have you lost your mind?”

“I could speculate this morning, or *know* by this evening, all right? Listen, Barney— I will be on the spot. Bellatrix Black will weep and rage before my eyes. Have a memory diffusion platform ready for me by three this afternoon, and you will have *pictures* of her raging.”

“And if someone else has the story before us?”

“You’ll likely be told to send someone to cover the meeting board of governors as soon as is humanly possible, actually,” Rita said, trying to contain her gloating. Failing. “Lucius Malfoy might even tell you himself.”

Barney’s eyes were closed; his face was still with anticipation. “A trusted source.”

“Truly, Mr. Cuffe. I’ll owl you the Bagshot article, of course, but still. I’ll need that memory platform set up when I get to the office.”

“You’ll have it,” Barney said, nodding sharply. “Now let me get the bloody hell back to sleep.”

Rita smiled slightly, nodded, and did as he asked. She doubted he’d sleep at all— most likely, he was drumming Lance or Katy out of their beds and telling them to write up something, *anything* about young Black’s expulsion. It would still fall to her to go out and soak the event in her memory and spill it out onto paper, of course. Half in case things didn’t go quite as excitingly as she’d predicted, and half because he knew her memory and her imagination, and knew no one else at the *Prophet* could beat her at writing the salacious.

Let others be polite, Rita told herself, smiling hungrily in the dimness of her room. *The sordid is mine*.

Despite everything, when Rita’s super-shrill alarm woke her hours later, she found herself reluctant to leave her warm bed. She ignored the ache her knees had picked up on remembering from last night by dint of reciting headlines for the story she would chase this morning to herself.

“Black Expelled,” she said out loud, when she realised she was falling asleep on her feet. Her voice sounded tired, and it was painful to speak around her too-dry mouth. She summoned some while she put together her disguise— a tatty grey robe, scraggly wig of greying brown hair and just a hint of Transfiguration ensured she looked a little like a poor, tired version her mother, and definitely not like herself. “For my grandson,” she tried whispering, to see what she sounded like. “His mam don’t teach him enough about the law.”

A quick look in the mirror upon her door made Rita smile ruefully. It was comical to see herself like this, like the people whom lordly folks like Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix LeStrange did not notice at a scene. Like the people she sought out for interviews, who had watched the scene unnoticed and would not be remembered for revenge.

“Out you go,” Rita said to herself, letting the smile become as weary as she liked. “Time to get to work.”

Minutes later, she was walking the streets of Hogsmeade, a warm bottle of Butterbeer clutched in hand. Rosmerta had barely looked at Rita as she served her; strike one for the costume. No one had eyed her with anything but pity or mild interest; strike two. Now all that was left to her was to brave the cold morning until eight o’clock, when the meeting of the Board of Governors would begin.

Standing about in the street being jostled by the morning crowd heading for the train station palled quickly, so Rita sought out a seat. As she lowered herself into one of the benches that dotted the tiny public garden opposite the post office, she felt rather than heard the sudden pauses of conversations in the street. The whispers that replaced them helped her pin down the source of the disturbance: Bellatrix Black, walking past the post office with her son on her arm.

Rita was up on her feet and following them before she even realised she’d stood up. Bellatrix did not look back more than once, but Rita took no chances, keeping as far back from her as was possible—looking at how easily Antares’ hand lay in his mother’s own did not erase the things that Bellatrix had done. Satisfaction bloomed in Rita’s belly as she noted the worn state of the pair’s robes. Only bloody right, as far as she was concerned.

The two of them reached the town hall minutes later. However, instead of going in, they paused and turned to face Rita.

To accuse me, Rita thought. She was not sure why she herself had stopped—the look on Bellatrix’s face was cold, but hardly violent. *Play it out, you fool*, Rita told herself, forcing her legs to move so they carried her past the two and into the town hall. It seemed a horrible choice, but was necessary if she was not to give herself away. Not

that she had any idea how that would happen, since neither of them likely knew how she looked—

The sound of Bellatrix's paralysed her. "Are you here for the meeting of the school board?" Clear, polite, but with a strange tightness in it, that was Bellatrix's tone. Unfortunately, Rita could not quite get herself to volunteer more than a nod. Headlines flashed before her as she turned to meet Bellatrix's eye to lessen the rudeness of her spare reply. The savage calm on her face only made the headlines in Rita's head more gory. "It isn't open to the public, I'm afraid."

"A shame," Rita made herself say, feeling relieved that her voice shook a little, as it would add to her disguise. "My son's boy don't know much about Hogwarts law— I thought I could see some today." She waved a hand in Antares' direction. "That your boy?"

"You read the papers," Bellatrix said coldly, drawing the boy ever so slightly towards her. "I'm sure you know." Rita looked down; she couldn't help herself. "You're just too frightened to sneer to my face." The small movement Rita could see out of the corner of her eye made her want to scream. "Well today, you can go back home and tell your grandson that you bearded a Black in her den. He'll believe you, you know. People will believe anything."

"M— much obliged, ma'am," Rita said, to fill the silence that fell. When she looked up, she wondered that she hadn't died from the hatred in the look Bellatrix had trained on her. "I'll just be leaving, then."

"Not so fast," someone said, their warm voice coming from the door behind Bellatrix and her son. "The trial was voted open to the public last night." Lucius Malfoy came into view, navigating past them all with a delighted ease that made Rita wonder. "Come, dear," he called past them. "If you want a good seat, you'd better hurry; it's obvious to me now that they'll go quickly."

"No need to shout," Narcissa Malfoy said, slipping into the crowded corridor with the same ease. She ignored Bellatrix entirely, moving past her and her son like they were part of the walls. And well for her; Rita wondered that no one was fainting yet at the hatred oozing from the woman. "You were right, though; that walk did me good."

“My own sister.” The sound and feeling of it carried, ensuring that everyone’s eyes went to Bellatrix’s intensely calm face.

Except for Narcissa’s eyes. She looked about in perfectly feigned confusion, then spoke. “Did you hear something, Lucius?”

Malfoy smiled. “Not at all. Come, darling; let’s find you a seat.” They walked on, turning right into what Rita supposed was another corridor that led to the room where the trial would be held. The silence that gathered in the corridor they left seemed to weigh Rita down.

Odd, then, that it was broken by the boy. “Mum,” he said quietly, tightly. Rita’s breath caught at how the ugly look on his face faded into worry, into concern. “We’ll be late.”

“We won’t,” Bellatrix said, calm gathering over the rage on her face. “Do you hear? We won’t.” The look she directed at her son raised the hair on the back of Rita’s slightly sweaty neck.

There’s more to this, she found herself thinking, watching Bellatrix shepherd her son down the same path as the Malfoys. *Has to be.*

The corridor turned out to lead straight into the front hall of the building. Rita, after wracking her brain, decided that the entrance Bellatrix had led her to had to be some sort of back entrance. Setting aside the shivers that gave her when she remembered the way Bellatrix had looked at her, Rita found herself eyeing the Malfoys in a new light. They had to have chosen that entrance on purpose, just as the reviving walk Narcissa Malfoy had blithely mentioned had been carried out on purpose. No one would have missed the significance of Bellatrix Black and her son and the Malfoys being spotted walking towards the town hall on a Thursday morning. Whether or not the speculative headlines about Antares’ expulsion had already hit, it would be all too easy to connect those sightings to what would come after. In a nutshell, the Malfoys had very cannily set the stage for total humiliation for Bellatrix.

A dangerous proposition, Rita thought. Encountering the woman before the trial had done nothing but strengthen Rita’s supposition

that she might do murder before the week was out. Watching her stiff back now as people milled around in the front hall, Rita found herself wondering if murder would be done during the trial. Dumbledore's appearance had only seemed to make Bellatrix angrier; the only real thing that Rita thought might give her pause was the presence of her son. Even then, that probably depended on who was at the other end of Bellatrix's wand—the way that boy kept eyeing the Malfoys, he wouldn't bat an eye if it happened to be either of them.

Jane's clear voice cut through the noise of the governors and the others in the front hall, quieting them all. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Room 15 is ready for meeting 6 of the Hogwarts Board of Governors. Seating is limited, so only concerned parties, witnesses and the governors may enter. Four seats will go to members of the public, the identities of those members being determined by the usual method." Jane held up a scroll briefly, then opened it. "In order of recorded entrance, then." Rita's mouth fell open— today, the last person she wanted to enter that trial room as was herself. "Fawcett, Mary. Dwight, Lisa. Malfoy, Narcissa. Bernard, Olive. Please make your way to the first door on your right through this corridor, thank you. Trial will begin in half an hour."

Rita tried not to sigh in relief. Despite that, one escaped her as Jane scrutinised her briefly with her wand and then nodded her on into the corridor. She'd forgotten how well Jane did with details. Rita stretched out her walk to the trial room as much as possible, hoping to spot the important faces she might have missed earlier while in the grip of fear. It paid off— not only was Professor McGonagall present, the other three heads of house were as well. Every one of them looked grim, and that distracted Rita until she realised that there was one more Fawcett involved in this trial.

"Sorry, excuse me, coming through!" The sharp warnings Angeline Fawcett called out as she levitated a bulky black briefcase into the trial room did not hide the odd satisfaction in her tone. Rita followed her in, feeling more intrigued than ever.

Mary Fawcett, already settled into one of the seats nearest to the door, exchanged a significant look with her cousin-in-law as she passed by. Itching with curiosity, Rita apologised her way into the

empty chair on the other side of the Mary Fawcett as quickly as she could, so as to preserve a good view of everything. Unfortunately, minutes after she'd settled into it, Severus Snape slid into the seat in front of her, Professor McGonagall lowering into the seat beside him. And, by the slightly nervous look on Angeline Fawcett's face, Bellatrix would be sitting by her in the front row as soon as she was done settling her son in a chair by the large, covered platform in front of the governors' long table.

On the other side of the open door, things were not much better. Narcissa Malfoy sat nearest to the door in the last row and was conversing very politely with Olive Bernard, who was seated uncomfortably beside her. Professor Sprout was right in front of Mrs. Bernard, and she was conversing with Professor Flitwick in a far more relaxed fashion. Andrew Bones was in front of her, probably here to represent the Ministry— *didn't notice him earlier*— and he was not talking to Professor Dumbledore at all. Bones looked every bit as nervous as Dumbledore looked calm, and almost as nervous as Antares Black did in his lonely chair in front of everyone. Then again, he was likely one of the youngest people in the room.

Which said something— the Ministry of Magic couldn't know what was slated to happen this morning. The last person they'd want keeping an eye on this event was someone who could be rattled by Dumbledore or any of the other players on the school board, and Andrew Bones looked to be that person. Then again—

"Silence, please." Jane said, closing the door behind her. She walked briskly to the front of the room, raised her wand and begun the session by whisking off the cover on the platform in front. Rita sat up and blinked hard— *that can't be a memory diffusion platform*. It was huge, its dull black surface absorbing the light in the bright room and fixing the attention of everyone in it. *Who built that?*

Jane answered her question. "As you can all see, an enlargement was requested of our usual diffusion platform. We have Professors Dumbledore, Flitwick, McGonagall, Sprout and Snape to thank for this rapid change."

Lucius Malfoy, second from the right end of the table, shifted importantly in his seat. "Clerk, who requested this?"

Angeline Fawcett's voice cut over Jane's slightly pained reply. "I did, Mr. Malfoy. I was of the opinion that the board would prefer a closer view of the evidence."

"Of what evidence, Ms. Fawcett?" Lucius shot back. "In the brief we were all sent, mention was made of two, or at most three pieces of evidence."

"Hold your horses, Lucius," Tiberius Ogden said, from the other end of the table. "We're yet to even begin the meeting."

"Oh, I'll be glad to address Mr. Malfoy's concern," Angeline said quickly. "We had not yet obtained permission to show the evidence, them being memories of the defendant."

"Why so? He committed his crimes a little more than week ago, if I'm not mistaken," Lucius said, a thin smile on his face. "You had ample time to obtain such permission."

"Begging the pardon of the board, the circumstances that led to our discovery of his crimes left us all quite...busy," Angeline replied, looking mysteriously undisturbed by the probably sound argument Lucius had just put forward. Rita bit her tongue to contain her excitement; she'd been right in thinking there would be more to this trial than a simple review-and-expell case. "I assure each governor that the reasons for our delay will be fully explained by the evidence and testimony that will be given."

"Assurances already," Lucius said, his smile widening. "Looks like we'll be here all day."

"Meeting 6 of the Hogwarts Board of Governors of the year 1992 is underway," Doreen Summers said, her tone coldly polite. She frowned at Lucius, who was now smiling down at his folded hands on top of the table, and continued. "Being a half-session meeting held in the town hall of Hogsmeade on Thursday, September the twenty-fourth. I will begin by reading a summary of the minutes of the most recent meeting. These minutes are available after this meeting with

the minutes of this meeting and all others in the office of our Clerk, Ms. Goodbody. Now, in the last meeting...”

Rita, satisfied that nothing important was being said, diverted her energy towards looking around the trial room as closely as she could without seeming to. Angeline Fawcett had quietly opened the large briefcase, and was nonchalantly going through the veritable forest of diffusion vials. Rita soon found that she couldn't quite make out the spidery script on the labels attached to each vial, and quickly resigned herself to speculating about them instead. She could see what looked like several elaborate uppercase A's on some labels—Antares' memories, perhaps?—but nothing beyond that, so she continued to let her gaze wander the room.

Angeline's clear, confident tone drew her attention back to the front of the room. “...contends that he is innocent or can be held so, by reason of frequent and persistent loss of personal control of his mind, body and magic, such loss being caused by a Dark article in his unwilling possession.” Rita could not stop herself from licking her lips—possession, that sounded like. But by whom?

Morgan Grimstone, leaning slightly forward in her seat beside Lucius, seemed just as interested in the answer. “A Dark Article?”

“A muggle diary infused, to wit, with parts of the soul of one claiming to be Thomas Marvolo Riddle,” Angeline said slowly, not sounding quite as assured as before. “Or, as we more commonly knew him, Lord Voldemort.” Her voice shook on the last words, and whatever she had wanted to add to that was lost in the murmur that followed.

“Ridiculous,” Doreen Summers said over and over again. “Such lies!”

“Do you believe me now, Gerry?” Lucius was saying loudly to Gerald Dobbs, who was seated on the other side of a faintly green Morgan Grimstone. “They're here to waste our time on dreams and suppositions—”

“If you'll let me continue,” Angeline said fiercely, her sharp tone cutting across the noise. “If you *had* let me continue, you would have heard me say that I did not believe what I was told when asked to represent Mr. Black. You would have heard me say that I now believe

that there is more than enough evidence to show that that young man is not a criminal in the making, but a hero. Will you at least do him the courtesy of listening to the facts? None of us here believe what the conspiracy mongers at the Quibbler believe. I assume that we all know that memories can be altered, but not faked. That pensieves show the truth.”

She snatched up a vial and set it on the diffusion platform; its clink could be heard in the silent room. “What we have here, ladies and gentlemen, is nothing but a large pensieve. Listen to his memories, if you won’t listen to him.” She flicked her wand at the platform. “*Begin.*”

The lighting in the room dimmed as mist rose from the platform and filled the room. It cleared quickly to reveal a bright toilet— “The boy’s bathroom on the first floor at Hogwarts School on Tuesday, September the 22nd.” Angeline’s voice seemed to come from far away. “Enter the defendant and his friends.”

On cue, the door to the toilet burst open, and Antares Black was dragged inside by a young girl and boy of about the same age. He looked pale and sick, and the concern on his friend’s faces picked at Rita. When he spoke, she could barely hear him. “You shouldn’t be in here,” he muttered. “Tracey—”

“Get his bag, I think he dropped it,” the other boy said, obviously ignoring him. “Go on, I’ll handle him.” The girl let go of Antares’ other arm and raced out the door, with an obvious result. As Antares’ friend buckled under his dead weight, he struggled to hold him up, and quickly chose to prop him up against the door. Antares slid down, eyes vacant; his friend tugged frantically on his arms. “Antares, I can’t hold you up forever,” he snapped, the worry on his face increasing. “Just— get on your feet, on your feet, that’s it.” Antares barely complied, allowing himself to be dragged into one of the stalls and propped against one of its walls as his friend opened a toilet bowl. “Just lean over there, that’s good—”

Antares did not move. His friend shook him once, gently, then again, not so gently. “Are you listening to me?” When he let go, Antares began to slump to the ground, looking paler than ever. “Shit. Just – just stay there, I’ll go get Tracey— I’ll just be a second, all right?” As

his obviously panicked friend fled the toilets, Antares slumped over the toilet bowl, insensible.

Just as slowly, someone shimmered into being just in front of Antares' stall. A faintly transparent boy with a prefect's badge pinned to his fresh robes, with a hungry look in his green eyes. Rita felt sick, and wished she could protest the way the diffusion platform was drawing her into the stall with that boy as he walked in and shut the door. Antares, though insensible to his surroundings, immediately noticed him. A blank fear seemed to settle on him. Rita wondered if it was the same as the fear that had her gripping her knees so hard that she could feel them even in the memory.

Breathing slowly, she tried to reassure herself that that boy could not be— had not been—

"Sorry I did that," the boy said, leaning easily against the stall door, looking quite unconcerned at how Antares was now starting to shiver. "You weren't taking it as well as I thought, so I thought I'd just—"

"Fuck around with my memory?" Antares said. He sounded only slightly less at death's door than how he looked. "Why?"

"Why...?" The boy stared at him, disbelief clear on his face. "Because you don't leave enemies behind. Not alive, anyway."

"But they're—"

"That was your fault, though, wasn't it? Still," the boy said, a thoughtful expression sliding onto his face, "I suppose we could kill the mandrakes." Rita's mind raced uselessly— why mandrakes? *Why?* "That'd keep us safe for months extra, I think, and it'd only be a simple frost spell—"

Antares had stopped shaking, and a strange kind of certainty was surfacing through the fear on his face. "I am done," he said slowly, "with killing things."

For his pains, the boy gave him a amused, tolerant smile. "You're done when I say you're done," he said, calmly. "Or did you think that

great fat snake came from nowhere?" The boy shook his head. "You owe me."

"I don't owe you –"

"And if you don't pay me back, our little memory spell will kill you," the boy continued, as if he hadn't heard Antares' shaky protest. "The Sharing spell's a little touchy like that. But you know that already, don't you?" His smile grew a little wider, becoming vicious. "Next time, when someone tells you to read up on a spell, do it. Although I doubt you'll have that problem with me, from now on. Will you?"

Antares gulped audibly, and was soon shivering again. Rita barely heard the rest of what the boy said, being too absorbed in watching this faint, blue version of the boy she'd seen in the courtroom. Anger joined her fear— no matter what Antares Black had done, it was hardly enough to deserve whatever torture he was being put through here.

Torture it was; worse, pleasure at inflicting such mental and perhaps physical torture was clear in the older boy's hard, green eyes. "...you will pay that debt exactly as I wish. Got it?" He faded suddenly, startling Antares, and Rita shivered as she saw a faint mist settle on him.

The loud, insistent knocking began the last horror of the memory. Rita found herself fighting the urge to retch as she watched Antares move out of the stall, the colour now back in his thin face contrasting horribly with the dull fear in his eyes. He slowed once or twice, his internal struggle clear in the way his eyes roved wildly, but he was soon at the toilet door, where his friends could be heard pounding to be let inside. Rita closed her eyes as the door handle began to turn, unable to watch any longer.

The laughter forced her eyes open. The boy was there again, standing over Antares' cowering, limp body, which blocked the toilet door. "It'll be easy once you're dead," he said, smirking. "He'll even help me – feel that?" The door was shifting against Antares, the thumps and curses getting louder as his friend tried harder to get in. The boy leaned close over Antares, a nasty smile on his face. "I wish you could watch. Obviously, you can't have everything..."

Rita held her breath as he took Antares' head in his solid-looking hands, chanting something—

Nothing happened. For a moment, anger and surprise warred on the boy's face as he glared down at Antares, chanting again. Then suddenly he tried to move back, shock clear on his face. He could not— his hands were stuck to Antares' pale face. Unmoved by his struggles, they turned a blistering red, and began shrivelling before Rita's eyes. Satisfaction burned through her as she watched mortal fear form on that arrogant young face, burning away what little sympathy his painful, inhuman screams raised in her. She found herself unable to look away as he and Antares convulsed and shook, as colour returned to Antares' face even as the boy's face shrivelled and shrank. A dark liquid began to spread under Antares, alarming her momentarily until she saw that the boy was now gone, and that the little light remaining in the toilet showed the liquid to be mottled blue and black.

Then everything was over— the door had burst open, and Antares' wild-eyed friends were panicking and shouting at each other over the sight of his limp body, and soaked robes. The sight of Tracey, the girl, shaking Antares' shoulder and desperately ordering him to keep his eyes open began to fade, but not before Rita saw a tired half-smile appear on his face.

Angeline Fawcett's voice was upon them all again even before the mist from the platform had dissipated. "I heard and believed the explanation of just how the defendant managed to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named early yesterday morning, but do not believe I can do it justice, or answer the board's questions about it. Therefore—"

"Wait," Lucius said. He was pale, paler even than the other young Frederic Fawcett, who was seated on his left. "I demand proof!"

"Proof of what?" snapped Ogden, from farther down the table. "If you are blind and deaf this morning, Mr. Malfoy, do the board the courtesy of informing us of your condition so we can remedy it *before* evidence you can apparently neither see nor hear is shown to us."

“Oh, I saw that memory just as well as you did, Tiberius,” Lucius snarled. “I demand proof that Antares Black is not *still* possessed, and has not manufactured—”

“Lucius, he’s *twelve*,” Morgan Grimstone said, eying him in disbelief. “However talented he is—”

“Governors, if you sincerely believe that He-who-must-not-be-named would seriously subject himself to being patronised by all six of you this morning, the rest of my arguments are useless,” Angeline spat, now truly angry. “Care to ask for more proof, Mr. Malfoy?”

Rita, ignoring how Lucius was glaring at Angeline, looked instead at her family members. Frederick Fawcett’s colour had all come back, and Mary Fawcett, his wife, had a tight smile on her face. *They know*, Rita thought. *They must know—*

“Well, Mr. Malfoy, despite the fact that you are not still requesting proof, I have proof to give you nonetheless.” Angeline snapped her wand toward the briefcase behind her, and an old, dirty book rose out of it. It was turning gently in an airtight bubble, and continued to do so as Angeline held it in her hands. “This, ladies and gentlemen, is your proof,” she said, dispelling the bubble. The book crackled in her hand as she opened it, and soon it was floating over to the other end of the table, where a still-pale Doreen Summers received it gently.

With difficulty, Rita took her eyes off the book, watching Summers’ face as she read whatever was in it. Her expression changed rapidly from surprise to disgust, and when she passed it on to Ogden, she levelled that look directly at Lucius. Ogden did the same as he passed it to Dobbs. Rita watched Lucius from then on, marvelling at the fear that flashed across it as Morgan Grimstone coldly handed the book to him. His expression from then on was stony, and he handed the book on to Frederick Fawcett as if it were just what it looked like— a tattered old book.

“Fraud,” he said, as Angeline walked around the diffusion platform to accept the book from Frederick. “A cheap fraud.”

“The book bled ink as its true owner died,” Angeline said, not even looking at Lucius as she turned away. “A rather intricate fraud, if a

fraud at all. And rather strangely connected to that evil young man we all saw die screaming minutes before now after threatening the life of Antares Black and his unlucky friends.” Rita noticed that Antares shrunk in his seat as Angeline floated the book past him; she did not blame him. “I think you’d quite like it to be a fraud, Mr. Malfoy. Which begs some serious questions.”

“Questions that would be begged if it was a fraud, Ms. Fawcett,” Lucius said, sounding bored. “At least tell me you’ll *try* to connect it to me with hard evidence.”

Angeline turned again, and smiled. “Hard evidence, eh? Well, if the board wishes to see evidence...”

“Mr. Malfoy does not speak for the board, Ms. Fawcett,” Summers said sharply, eyeing Ogden and Dobbs. “I think we can agree on that. Can we not?”

Murmured agreement answered her, making Lucius’ expression stonier still. “No benefit of the doubt? Governors, try to recall that this is my word against that of a delinquent child—”

“Your word against memory,” Angeline snapped, interrupting him rudely. “Your word against proof, against *truth*. Mrs. Summers, I believe you’ve worked with Mr. Malfoy since he begun his tenure on the board. In your opinion, in whose handwriting is the signature on the last page of this diary?”

Lucius’s hands twitched. “Fawcett, that could have been forged all too easily—”

“In my opinion, that signature is in Lucius’ hand,” Doreen said quietly, her voice tight with anger. “Without a doubt, it is his hand.”

Lucius waved a slightly unsteady hand in Angeline’s direction. “So, then. An intricate forgery, as you said earlier. I *do* have enemies, Ms. Fawcett— could this not be their work?”

“You speak of enemies, do you?” Angeline said, lifting another vial from her briefcase. She replaced the other one with it. “All to the good. You see,” she gave him a hard smile, “I will speak of enemies too.”

Lucius had no reply to that. The look in his eyes, however, was quite a good approximation of someone who had found himself cornered. Then the mist of the diffusion machine was filling the room again, and they were abruptly in Flourish and Blotts' crowded store on the day of Gilderoy Lockhart's book signing. Rita watched the following confrontation almost greedily, and didn't need Angeline's clear, cutting warning to tell her when to watch Lucius' hands. Sure enough, an old-looking diary was casually slipped into Antares' cauldron almost as soon as Bellatrix arrived on the scene. And Lucius had plenty of time between then and when she left to ensure the book was not immediately visible— from the way they parted, Rita rather thought that Bellatrix would have burnt it on sight if she'd seen it right away.

The fading mists revealed the trial room again, and did nothing to reduce the new tension surrounding Lucius at his place at the governors' table. Angeline removed the vial from the platform slowly, letting the mutters build. "Do you desire more hard evidence, Mr. Malfoy? I have with me a memory indicating exactly where young Mr. Black found that poisonous diary. Just in case you've entirely forgotten where you put it."

Lucius' smile was forced. "You slander me most grievously, Ms. Fawcett."

"Governors, I submit to you that Mr. Lucius Malfoy be...temporarily removed from among your number for the duration of this trial," Angeline said calmly, shifting her large briefcase into Dumbledore's hands. "His bias is evident."

Before Lucius could say anything, Jane's clear, nonchalant voice was filling the room. "The submission is marked as received, Ms. Fawcett. Will the chairman consider it now, or later?"

"Now," Doreen Summers said flatly. "Fellow governors, I move that Lucius Malfoy step down as governor on the school board of Hogwarts for the duration of this trial, due to evident bias against the defendant."

"This is *slander*!"

"I second the motion." Dobbs did not flinch at the dirty look Lucius gave him, being far too busy giving him one right back. "Ogden, your vote?"

"I vote that he step down. Permanently."

Dobbs smiled, just a little. "I'll take that as a yes. Grimstone?"

"Aye." Her hands had fisted on the table. "Aye."

"Fawcett?"

"I also vote that he step down permanently," Frederick said quietly. If anything the look Lucius gave him made him look slightly pleased. "To be blind to such incontrovertible evidence is despicable, and entirely unworthy behaviour of a governor on the board."

"And how on earth would you know unworthy behaviour, Fawcett?" Lucius snarled. "Apart from how it dances with you at your legendary parties every Sunday night, of course—"

"Only if I was drunk or entirely insensible to the consequences of my actions would I ever have handed that diary to a child," Frederick shot back. "Do you have such an excuse, Lucius? Pardon my disbelief, but you looked about as sober and thinking as anyone here when you slipped it into his cauldron—"

"And don't dare say you didn't know what might happen if it fell into the boy's hands," Ogden snarled. "Why else would you carry such a dangerous article with you? Unless you'd have us believe it a keepsake of your nightmarish experiences with He-who-must-not-be-named's ravages of your mind—"

"Perhaps I am mistaken, Ogden— just when did the DMLE give you the right to judge me for imaginary criminal acts?" That silenced Ogden, but only barely. Frederick Fawcett and Morgan Grimstone had drawn their chairs away from Lucius on either side of him, and the strange look on his face indicated that he'd not been able to ignore that.

"You've made your point, Lucius," Doreen said, finally. "We cannot try you here. I sorely wish we could, but that is neither here nor there. However, as unfit as we are to try you, you are surely more unfit to aid us in trying the case of this young man. Step down, immediately."

Lucius rose sharply, the shriek of his chair mirrored by that of Narcissa's. She moved calmly for the door; not so him. He glared hatefully at Antares as he stalked past him, and therefore missed the look Angelina and Frederick exchanged.

"Chairman, a quick question," Frederick said, loudly. "None of us are allowed to leave these sessions prematurely, are we? Even after stepping down from our positions?"

The look Lucius gave him was murderous. "You wouldn't dare."

"Not that I'd like him to stay," Frederick continued, ignoring him. "Far from it. But I know very well that his first stop will likely be with the nearest newspaper editor he can find, to discredit the results of this hearing, at the least."

"The geas we accepted is binding even in the case of dismissal, Frederick," Ogden said. "We do have that."

"A geas can be broken," was the deliberate answer. "If he is here—"

"You have no right," Lucius spat, "to detain me here against my will—"

"I have that right, Lucius." Heads turned in Professor Dumbledore's direction, though his interruption had been quiet. "Do you dispute it?"

Lucius bared his teeth. He gave no answer, knowing as well as everyone else that no one would be too interested in exactly what law gave Dumbledore the right to detain whomever he wished as saw fit, especially not if Lucius was on trial for possession and wilful distribution of Dark objects. So Narcissa sank stiffly back into her seat, and Lucius accepted Angeline Fawcett's offer of a seat...beside Bellatrix Black, whose dark smile was the ultimate insult.

“A mere spectator already,” Rita heard her say to him, sweetly. “Sneer at me now, why don’t you.” When the answer she waited greedily for did not come, she laughed softly.

A sign of things to come, Rita thought, stark curiosity gnawing at her insides. *Good things*.

Tales of horror, brave struggle and human weakness— good things indeed— filled Room 15 of the Hogsmeade town hall for almost two hours. By the end of the first hour, Rita could have written the verdict of the board herself.

“Innocent,” Doreen Summers had said, her voice steady with promise, “by reason of repeated, persistent and involuntary loss of personal control. For the various acts perpetrated against his fellow students while in full control of his mind, body and magic, guilty,” she’d continued, her voice becoming stern. “As punishment, we strip Antares Black of his privileges and duties as Hogwarts Apprentice for one full school year, and advise that he take up his duties on the start of the following term once that school year is ended.”

Rita, however, still couldn’t quite believe what she had seen. The stilted, frantic conversations and frightening scenes had somehow all coalesced into strange, incontrovertible fact— that Antares Black had, for the last month or so, been a partially unwilling instrument of an insubstantial but equally threatening version of You-Know-Who.

There were things that hadn’t been explained, of course. Rita didn’t think she’d been the only one to notice how artfully Dumbledore, while in the witness’ chair, had danced around the question of why that Invisibility cloak had been sent to the boy by mistake. Obscure hints had been made that seemed to fully satisfy only the older members of the board, and Rita had marked the way some of the tension had eased from Bellatrix’s stiff back as Dumbledore was politely given leave to regain his seat. Rita’s tongue was still sore from how she’d bitten it when the Headmaster was called to the governors’ table for a private discussion, and had spoken at some length to them behind an infuriatingly strong silencing charm.

The expressions of the Malfoys as Antares' partial pardon was read out was almost compensation enough, however. And Bellatrix's proud, simple statement after that had driven that secret conversation out of Rita's head almost entirely. Almost.

"Your son has been cleared of all charges, Ms. Black," Doreen had said slowly, after Bellatrix had spoken. "Why would you wish to withdraw him from Hogwarts?"

"He needs rest," was Bellatrix's simple answer. No one had argued with her, and Rita could do nothing but suppose that that too was somehow related to whatever reason Dumbledore had refused to give to the entire room. The abrupt, barely explained withdrawal of Antares from Hogwarts would play extremely well at the *Prophet*, of course. And since Rita could hardly have openly complained or sought a far more detailed explanation, she'd resigned herself to the fact that a significant portion of the events that had led them all here would probably not be told.

Rita smiled to herself, barely feeling the cold as she finally stepped out of the town hall. If anyone was good at working with half a story, it was her. Almost without thinking, she hung back beside the door and watched until Bellatrix emerged from it, her son in. There was a small, satisfied smile on Bellatrix's face as she guided Antares out into the dim afternoon. The intensity of the look she gave him made Rita catch her breath; that was love, fierce and strong, and yet afraid.

Rita watched the look disappear in something that was close to awe. *Perfect*, she thought. *Perfect for the front cover.*

A/N: And it is done. Finally done.

Hope you liked the ride.